The New Criterion

December 1996

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
The future of the European past, IV
by John Gross, 4
Corot in New York *by Roger Kimball*, 14
Melville in the try-pots *by James W. Tuttleton*, 23
Max Beckmann *by Karen Wilkin*, 31
Two early poems *by T. S. Eliot*, 37

Theater: Two cheers for Andrew Lloyd Webber *by Mark Steyn*, 43; **Art:** "Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective" *by Mario Naves*, 49; **Dance:** Karol Armitage *by Laura Jacobs*, 52; **The media:** A pretense of professionalism *by James Bowman*, 55; **Verse chronicle:** Old guys *by William Logan*, 61
Books: *Mavis Gallant* Collected stories *reviewed by Brooke Allen*, 69; *Thomas Mallon* Dewey defeats Truman *reviewed by Peter Schwendener*, 72; *Edward O. Wilson* In search of nature *reviewed by Paul R. Gross*, 74;
Notebook: The end of the Sokal affair *by Erich Eichman*, 77

Volume 15, Number 4, $4.75

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot

[1796–1875]

Late Paintings

December 5, 1996 to January 13, 1997

Illustrated catalogue available with
essay by Martin Dieterle

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York 10021 Tel (212) 879-6606

Monday-Saturday 9:30 to 5:30

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

AGENDA

EDITED BY WILLIAM COOKSON AND PETER DALE
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: ANITA MONEY

"Quite the best and most sane and rational poetry magazine, with the fewest axes to grind"
JOHN BAYLEY

"...the most important literary magazine in Britain over the past thirty years"
DONALD DAVIE

Issues of 1996:

IRISH POETRY DOUBLE NUMBER (320 pages) New poems by Heaney, Kinsella, Mahon, Montague, Kennelly and many new names. Price £8 ($16)

A TRIBUTE TO W.D. SNODGRASS New poems by him and essays on his work by James Fenton and others. Poems by R.S. Thomas, Donald Hall, Peter Porter and many more. Kathleen Raine on Ted Hughes's Coleridge. Price £4.50 ($9)

A TRIBUTE TO GEOFFREY HILL New poems and a long essay on T.S. Eliot by Geoffrey Hill, and essays on his work. A supplement of new poems and reviews.

Forthcoming early 1997:

DANTE, POUND & THE CONTEMPORARY POET (320 pages) New translations of Dante by Thom Gunn, Charles Tomlinson and many others. Essays relating *La Divina Commedia* to Pound's *Cantos*.

◆

We invite readers of THE NEW CRITERION to subscribe. Rates: One year (4 issues) — £22 ($44). We accept credit card payments (VISA/MASTERCARD).

Orders should be sent to **AGENDA, 5 Cranbourne Court, Albert Bridge Road, London, SW11 4PE, U.K. Tel. & Fax: 0171-228-0700.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Roger Fry *Giovanni Bellini*

Introduction by David Alan Brown *Afterword by* Hilton Kramer

Published in 1899, Roger Fry's first book revalued the work of Giovanni Bellini, whose reputation was in decline. Unavailable for nearly a century, Ursus Press is pleased to present a new edition of this important essay. 112 pages, 6 × 9¼ in., 25 b&w illustrations, clothbound, $19.95 + postage

Horace Walpole *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*

Introduction by John Dixon Hunt

Horace Walpole's delightful essay, written between 1750 and 1770, on garden design is one of the most famous and influential pieces of writing on the English landscape garden. 64 pages, 4¾ × 7½ in., clothbound, $11.95 + postage

INDIVIDUAL ORDERS: URSUS PRESS 981 Madison Avenue New York 10021 Tel (212) 772-8787
TO THE TRADE: Antique Collectors' Club Tel (800) 252-5231 Fax (914) 297-0068

An informal selection of plein air painting

SATURDAYS NOON TO 6,
SUNDAY TO FRIDAY BY APPOINTMENT

WILLIAM O'REILLY & CO., LTD.

52 EAST 76TH STREET NEW YORK, NY 10021
TEL 212-396-1822 FAX 212-396-1824

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *December 1996*

Editor & Publisher *Hilton Kramer*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Editor *David Yezzi*
Assistant to the Editors *Francesca Marx*
Editorial Intern *Maxwell Watman*

Publisher 1982–1994 *Samuel Lipman*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic of *The American Spectator*.

Erich Eichman is the book review editor of *The Wall Street Journal*.

John Gross is the theater critic of the London *Sunday Telegraph* and the author, most recently, of *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* (Simon & Schuster).

Paul R. Gross is the author, with Norman Levitt, of *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Johns Hopkins).

Laura Jacobs reviews dance regularly for *The New Criterion*.

Roger Kimball is the author of *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (HarperPerennial).

William Logan's forthcoming book of poems is *Vain Empires*.

Mario Naves is an artist living in New York.

Peter Schwendener's articles and essays have appeared in *The American Scholar*, *TriQuarterly*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and other publications.

Mark Steyn is the film critic of the London *Spectator*.

James W. Tuttleton is a professor of English at New York University.

Karen Wilkin's latest book, *Cézanne*, was published recently by Abbeville Press.

David Yezzi reviews books regularly for *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*.

"Mandarins" and "Paysage Triste" are excerpted from *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917* by T. S. Eliot, edited by Christopher Ricks, to be published by Harcourt Brace & Comapany. © 1996 by Valerie Eliot. Printed by permission of Harcourt Brace.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. December 1996, Volume 15, Number 4. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Subscribers: send all remittances, changes of address, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. For subscription problems call (800) 783-4903. Copyright © 1996 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Rt. 250, Milan, OH 44846. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising: Galleries & fine arts: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674. Publishers & others: Richard A. Vaughan, 129 Phelps Avenue, Rockford, IL 61108. (815) 398-8569.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOHN BEARDMAN

"HEIR'S CASCADE"
CAST ACRYLIC RESIN
79" x 49"

FALL - WINTER SCHEDULE

John Beardman
Cast Acrylic
Resin Paintings Dec 3–Jan 4

Jackie Mitchell
Paintings &
Collages Jan 7–Feb 1

Carol Goebel
Sculpture Feb 4–March 8

db
DENISE BIBRO
FINE ART

GALLERY & ART
ADVISORY SERVICES
• REPRESENTATION
• PROMOTION
• ESTATE SALES
• ART PLACEMENT

584 BROADWAY, SOHO, NYC 10012 #307-(212) 941-1734

Marlborough

Fall / Winter 1996

Fernando Botero
Paintings
23 October–26 November

Paula Rego
Recent Work
2 December–4 January

Marlborough Gallery, Inc.
40 W 57 Street New York NY 10019 (212) 541 4900

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: December 1996

Knowledge—or ghettoization?

Writing several years ago in *The New York Times Book Review*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., chairman of the Afro-American studies department at Harvard, observed that "ours was the generation that took over buildings in the late 1960s and demanded the creation of Black and Women's Studies programs, and now . . . we have come back to challenge the traditional curriculum." And, my, how they have succeeded!

We had occasion to recall Professor Gates's observation recently when the "Education Life" supplement for the November 3 issue of *The New York Times* ran an article entitled "Can Harvard's Powerhouse Alter the Course of Black Studies?" The burden of this long and flattering effusion, by the *Times* reporter Peter Applebome, was that, yes, Professor Gates was doing terrific things at Harvard. Among other things, he had dramatically increased the "profile" of the Afro-American studies department, chiefly by hiring left-wing academic celebrities such as Cornel West and William Julius Wilson, but also by pursuing and instigating numerous research projects both in his capacity as chairman of the Afro-American studies department and as head of Harvard's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research. "What we're doing," Professor Gates noted in the *Times*, "is trying to establish the field as a valid area of study, a valid area of intellectual inquiry." Elsewhere, Professor Gates has noted his ambition to effect the "permanent institutionalization" of Afro-American studies by producing or encouraging "foundational" research that would result in "bibliographies, concordances, dictionaries, encyclopedias," and other reference works.

If the production of print is all that it takes to establish an academic field of study, Professor Gates will have succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. He and his colleagues and collaborators are producing reams upon reams; just this week a plump *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, co-edited by Professor Gates, arrived on our desk; a seven-hundred-page *Dictionary of Global Culture*, also co-edited by Professor Gates, is due out in January; together with Kwame Anthony Appiah, Professor Gates is pursuing his "dream" of bringing Du Bois's idea of an *Encyclopedia Africana* into being; and so on.

But the question remains: *is* Afro-American studies a "valid area of intellectual inquiry"? Mr. Applebome clearly wants the *Times*'s readers to think so—at least insofar as Afro-American studies is conceived at Harvard under Professor Gates's leadership.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

To reinforce the impression of intellectual legitimacy, Applebome contrasts the activity at Harvard's Afro-American studies department with the program as it exists at Temple University under the leadership of Molefi Kete Asante. Asante is a confirmed Afrocentricist—not indeed the furthest-out of this far-out group of racialist rabble-rousers (like Leonard Jeffries, for example), but still far, far from home. In his book *The Afrocentric Idea*, he rails against "the preponderant Eurocentric myths of universalism, objectivity, and classical traditions," etc., urging instead a sympathetic understanding of African *Nommo* and *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Judging from Mr. Applebome's presentation, Professor Asante is deeply unhappy at all the attention Gates and company are getting at Harvard. ("We're not waiting for the messiah to come from Harvard. The database is already at Temple.") But the main point of bringing in the Temple program was to suggest how respectable, by contrast, Professor Gates's enterprise seems.

It is now possible to major in Afro-American studies at Harvard; a Ph.D. in the subject is planned. But still the question remains: *is* it really a subject? Frederick Douglass observed long ago, "No one idea has given rise to more oppression and persecution toward colored people of this country than that which makes Africa, not America, their home." And before he became radicalized, the novelist James Baldwin wrote that "relations between Negroes and whites must be based on the assumption that there is one race and we are all part of it." The whole premise of "Afro-American studies" programs runs contrary to the spirit of Baldwin's and Douglass's observations. "Afro-American studies" describes not an academic discipline but a political fiefdom; such fiefdoms are created and maintained not to aid in the pursuit of knowledge but to appease an ideological demand. The same, incidentally, goes for "women's studies" programs. Indeed, we believe (to adapt a *mot* from George Orwell) that all academic "studies" programs should be considered guilty until proven innocent. As the philosopher Roger Scruton put it, "to construct a subject around a political agenda is precisely to relinquish the pursuit of knowledge, and to abandon the claim to a place in the curriculum." No matter how lavishly funded or expertly promoted, Afro-American studies, like women's studies, is a pseudo-subject, entirely parasitic on real disciplines (history, English, anthropology, etc.). Such programs exist solely to further a political agenda and to fulfill "affirmative action" quotas that have been imposed upon the academy. As such, they perpetuate and extend the ghettoization of their inhabitants. Of course, a few individuals lucky enough to be at the right institution at the right time will enrich themselves. But the sad irony is that Afro-American studies, like women's studies, serves to continue the intellectual disenfranchisement of the very people it was meant to liberate.

Multiculturalism as campus political orthodoxy

Owing to its left-leaning political atmosphere, the town of Amherst, Massachusetts, home of the principal campus of the University of Massachusetts, is often ironically referred to by the local inhabitants as the People's Republic of Amherst, and the folks in charge of UMass—as the state university is called—nowadays seem more determined than ever to live up to this caricature of radical political orthodoxy. Their latest political gambit, which has once again thrown the university into an uproar, has been an attempt to establish "contributions to multiculturalism" as the basis upon which faculty members' merit raises, promotions, and tenure will be based. Henceforth, professors at UMass will be obliged to file an annual report on what, if anything, their teaching and their scholarship has contributed to the university's multiculturalist

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

agenda. Those who meet the requisite multiculturalist tests will be advanced; those who do not, will not.

The enforcement of such tests as a basis for academic advancement is all the more pernicious in this case because there is no officially agreed upon definition of multiculturalism at UMass. According to a recent report in a local newspaper—*The Springfield Sunday Republican*—a university task force tried and failed in 1994 to come to an agreement on the meaning of the term. But this doesn't mean that the university community doesn't understand the *de facto* meaning of multiculturalism. For it is also reported that a course in the religions of China, Egypt, Turkey, et al., which was granted "cultural diversity" status in the 1980s, had that designation withdrawn when it was discovered that the course failed to include specific sections on black Americans and women. In other words, the term "multiculturalism" is little more than a political euphemism for enforcing the study of politically preferred, politically correct subjects.

As the experience at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst suggests, the preferred method of enforcing the multicultural agenda is as follows: first you impose an affirmative action program that gives priority to black and female candidates, then you require of all of the faculty—not just those exclusively concerned with black studies or women's studies—that they make a demonstrable contribution to one field or another, or both, as a condition of advancement. Are we alone in discerning a whiff of totalitarian coerciveness (not to mention pedagogical folly) in this procedure?

From the archives of the academy:

MAT 192 Mathematics, Gender, and Culture (Spring)
3 Credit Hours

Survey of the effects of gender and culture on the teaching, learning and doing mathematics [*sic*]. Topics include: gender and race differences in mathematics, factors influencing them and sociological consequences; eurocentrism in mathematics; ethnomathematics; women and people of color in the history and development of mathematics; and gender and multicultural issues in mathematics education.

From the *Undergraduate Catalog 1996–1997* for the State University of New York College at Plattsburgh.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The future of the European past: IV

Knocking about the ruins

by John Gross

The only amusing thing I ever heard Hannah Arendt say—admittedly I only met her once or twice—was at a seminar in Princeton. The speaker was Dwight Macdonald; his subject was the inanity (or worse) of popular culture, and as he warmed to his theme, the counter-example he increasingly invoked was that of Europe. On the one hand Masscult and Midcult; on the other hand Athens, Florence, Paris, Weimar . . . He drifted on in this vein for about five minutes, until Arendt, who was sitting in the front row, permitted herself a very audible whisper: "Ach, Dwight, I could tell you a thing or two about that old Europe of yours."

No one in his right mind would want to defend the European past *en bloc*. In the twentieth century, Europe's gifts to the world have included Nazism and Communism, and even before that, Europeans had quite as much to be ashamed of in their history as Asians, Africans, or anyone else. No, if one worries about the future of the European past, it is as well to make clear that the term is being used in a highly selective manner. It is shorthand, first, for the positive achievements of European culture, and secondly, for the principle of social continuity—not stasis or blind resistance to change, but continuity.

In speaking of European culture, one immediately runs into an age-old problem. How far, except at a fairly high level of abstraction, does it actually exist? If you search long enough in the corridors of Brussels, you can no doubt discover a few officials who regard themselves as essentially European, and only incidentally French, German, or whatever; but the vast majority of Europeans continue to think of themselves first as French, German, or whatever. Europe remains a collection of cultures—interlinked, sometimes overlapping, but still distinct; and the same is even truer of the various historical legacies which European groups do or don't share. The past that a Russian brings to bear on his experience is as different from that of an Italian as that of a Norwegian is from that of an Irishman, or that of a Portuguese from that of a Pole.

Perhaps this will slowly change as economic and political integration proceeds. It certainly hasn't changed yet. On the other hand, some traditional boundaries *have* become blurred: the past twenty or thirty years have seen an unprecedented drawing together of European habits and attitudes, especially among the young, and there are times when one feels that one really is witnessing the emergence of a trans-European culture. But it is a phenomenon that has little to do with the institutions of the European Union, still less to do with immemorial traditions—*l'Europe aux anciens parapets*—and everything to do with prosperity, fashion, easy travel, and the mass media.

Many of the ingredients of the common brew will be tediously familiar to Amer-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

icans; most of them, indeed, are American in origin. Rock, rap, Rollerblades; Disney and MacDonald's; Quentin Tarantino, Beavis and Butt-head, Michael Jackson; and, if you want a handy symbol to sum up the whole phenomenon, you couldn't do much better, for the moment, than the ubiquitous baseball cap. There is a comic strip running in the London *Spectator*, about an obstreperous youth called Henry King, which gives some idea of how acute this last problem has become: the only real happiness Henry's parents know is when they are put in touch with a surgeon who has pioneered an operation designed to remove baseball caps from teenagers' heads. Not that the fashion is confined to adolescents. Princess Diana is a great wearer of baseball caps. So was the late Robert Maxwell.

There is, of course, nothing new about the enormous impact of American popular culture in Europe. It is a story as old as Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley; as old as Phineas T. Barnum (and in some respects, let it be said, a tribute to the superior energy and efficiency of the American product). But two things have changed over the past generation or so. First, Europeans have become more adept at generating mass entertainment and catering for mass consumption, in a manner which may still ultimately derive from American models but is far from merely imitative. (The Beatles were an obvious landmark here.) Secondly, pop culture is now so pervasive that it is thought of as being international rather than primarily American. There is much less transatlantic glamour attaching to it than there once was. It is part of the air that everybody breathes.

It has also had the effect, as it has gathered power, of making the past seem not merely old, but obsolete. What inducement is there, in a world of instant gratification and continual change, for thinking about the past at all? Consider the lyrics of today's pop songs: for the most part their range of reference is as narrow and impoverished as their vocabulary. The world began yesterday. But it wasn't always like that. In the early years of the century the British musical-hall star Marie Lloyd used to sing a song that went, "I'm one of the ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit":

Even the strongest cultural traditions have been eroded by the new dispensation. In a poll of 1,500 Italians recently published, over half of those questioned thought that Verdi's Aïda *was by Beethoven; on the other hand most of them had no difficulty identifying the soundtrack of* Pulp Fiction.

it was one of her greatest hits, and we can assume that her largely working-class audience had at least some idea who Cromwell was. Today Britain must spend at least fifty times as much on education as it did in Marie Lloyd's time—and if you came across a reference to Cromwell in a current pop song, it would seem as out of place as a Greek hexameter.

Even the strongest cultural traditions have been eroded by the new dispensation. Italy is the land of opera, and one of the happiest features of the Italian love of opera is that it has deep popular roots. But for anyone inclined to take too rosy a view of the situation, a poll of 1,500 Italians recently published in the *Corriere della Sera* makes instructive reading. Over half of those questioned, given a choice of composers, thought that Verdi's *Aïda* was by Beethoven; on the other hand most of them had no difficulty identifying the soundtrack of *Pulp Fiction*. Asked who, in their opinion, best represented Italian music abroad, they voted for a number of local pop stars in preference to what might have seemed the predictable choice of Pavarotti.

Complaints about the decline of "cultural literacy" must be almost as common in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Europe as they are in America. In every part of Europe, I would guess—but I will confine myself to Britain, the only country of which I can speak with anything like assurance.

Every so often British newspapers carry shock-horror stories about children's lack of general knowledge. Teachers—some teachers—recount the latest examples of their students' ignorance with gloomy relish. But has there actually been a deterioration in this respect? Weren't things, as many people claim, just as bad in the past—a past which we have either forgotten or idealized?

It will probably never be possible to provide conclusive proof one way or the other, but certainly there is no shortage of evidence pointing to a decline. A recent instance, widely remarked on, is the return, after a number of years' absence, of a popular television program called *University Challenge*, a general-knowledge quiz in which teams from different colleges are pitted against one another. In the 1960s and 1970s, the questions were difficult and the scores impressively high. In the 1990s, the questions remain difficult and most of the scores are depressingly low. They would be lower still if they weren't buoyed up by lots of marks scored for questions about rock music, a category which was barely acknowledged twenty or twenty-five years ago. Here at least the students display solid scholarship—almost, you might say, to the point of pedantry.

An even clearer demonstration of declining standards was provided this year by a Gallup survey in which two groups of people, one consisting of over-forty-fives and the other of under-twenty-fives, were asked a series of rudimentary questions about British history—Guy Fawkes, Sir Christopher Wren, 1066 and all that. The gulf between the old (or middle-aged) and the young was even plainer than one might have expected. The first group chalked up respectable scores, while the second group floundered. Most of the over-forty-fives, for instance, knew that the monarch in whose reign the Spanish Armada was defeated was Elizabeth. For most of the under-twenty-fives, it was a mystery.

It isn't only a question of information, however, but also one of values, interests, and attitudes. Every year, for example, Madame Tussaud's waxworks museum hands out a questionnaire asking visitors who they think is the greatest figure, past or present, British or foreign, on display. In 1960, the year in which the poll was instituted, the largest number of votes went to Churchill—a somewhat time-bound and parochial choice, perhaps, but hardly a discreditable one. This year the winner was Superman, with Princess Diana as runner-up.

But why should most people be expected to know any better, when one considers the influences by which they are bombarded? The gods of the media have become more real than reality—if a public figure has ever been portrayed in a play or film, for instance, his obituary is more likely to be accompanied by a picture of the actor who played him than by a picture of the man himself; and not a day goes by without a fresh assault being launched on established manners and habits of thought.

So much of the change is gratuitous, too, its only real purpose being to demonstrate that a marketing director, an editor, a producer knows how to stir things up. A particularly galling example is the current fashion for renaming pubs. Few British institutions, one might have supposed, were more indestructible, more part of the landscape, than the Red Lion, the Rose and Crown, the Wheatsheaf, or the King's Head. Now you are liable to wake up and find that their names have been replaced overnight by something facetious and disagreeable—the Slug and Lettuce, say, or the Rat and Parrot—with a glossy new signboard to match. There is a pub in Kent that is mentioned in Dickens (though it is much older than that) which until the other day was always known as the Guy, Earl of Warwick. Now it is the Ferret and Trouser Leg. Not a major tragedy, perhaps, but another thread torn from the social fabric.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Red Lion and the Rose and Crown have something in common, however tenuous, with the Tabard in Chaucer or the Boar's Head in Shakespeare. The Ferret and Trouser Leg is a publicist's bad joke.

What is particularly disheartening about the junking of the past is how little resistance has been offered by institutions which not so long ago would have been considered bulwarks of social stability. On the contrary, many of them seem anxious to speed the process on its way: the sentries have abandoned their posts and clambered aboard the bandwagon. Take the Church of England. For anyone with a sense of its history, and of the cultural coloration which it has always given to English life as a whole, it is impossible not to feel dismayed by its attempts to jazz itself up and project a user-friendly image. One especially striking aspect of decline, which impoverishes everybody, is its attitude to language and liturgy. For the past thirty-five years, ever since the publication of the New English Bible, it has been busy turning poetry into prose, and pretty undistinguished prose at that; and though its efforts in this respect have met with plenty of criticism, it continues to press blithely ahead. A new Church of England songbook, aimed primarily at children, but also intended for adults "who want to let their hair down," includes compositions bearing such titles as *I Like Eating Sandwiches and Cakes* and *Prayer Is Like a Telephone*. In one song, *Who's the King of the Jungle?*, the congregation is invited to act and sound like monkeys. Another contains the line "He gives me lips to eat my chips." One hopes the children are going to enjoy all this stuff; but reading about it, I couldn't help recalling D. H. Lawrence's beautiful essay "Hymns in a Man's Life," with its tribute to the power of hymns—good hymns, the kind that are being driven out by cake and sandwiches—to seize and enlarge a child's imagination.

The Church's latest stunt has been to unveil a corporate logo (who would ever have supposed that it needed one?) which has been specially devised for it by a commercial design group: an emblem combining the letter *c*, the letter *e*, and a cross, to be displayed on notepaper, signboards, and so forth in "warm episcopal purple." The purpose, we are told, is to improve the Church's credibility and to make it "more relevant to younger people." In this sign shalt thou conquer.

Then there is the BBC. The old BBC had its faults (as what does not?), but it also had enormous virtues. Many of those virtues still survive, in depleted or fragmented fashion: if you listened and viewed selectively enough, you might just about persuade yourself the character of the Corporation was essentially unchanged. But it would be an illusion. Over the past generation a great deal of the BBC's regular output has been coarsened, or radicalized, or both.

What is particularly disheartening about the junking of the past is how little resistance has been offered by institutions which not so long ago would have been considered bulwarks of social stability. On the contrary, many of them seem anxious to speed the process on its way.

Soap operas about the supposedly everyday life of supposedly ordinary people now feature incest, AIDS, cocaine, and gangland killings in pell-mell profusion. (Their predecessors look positively pastoral by contrast.) The most popular current broadcaster on BBC radio, someone called Chris Evans, is a hooligan who has to be heard to be believed. On magazine programs and the like, middle-class values are constantly assailed and ridiculed. At least, middle-class values are what they tend to get called: in my experience they have always been shared

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by most working-class people as well, but "middle-class" has established itself as a reliable term of abuse.

One further example of shifting standards—a smaller one, but highly symptomatic. The National Portrait Gallery in London is a noble institution, possibly the finest gallery of its kind in the world. Until some fifteen years ago, in accordance with its Victorian statutes, it wasn't allowed to purchase or accept portraits of living men and women. That almost inevitably had to change; and given that the Gallery is already well supplied with the dead, it is no great surprise if the living now make up around half the annual list of acquisitions. What would have been almost impossible to predict, on the other hand, even fifteen years ago, is the composition of the latest such list. Businessmen (of the headline-catching variety) and entertainers are generously represented, science and scholarship barely at all. There are no classical musicians, but space has been found for the pop singer Sting and for Malcolm McLaren, the founder of the punk group the Sex Pistols.

This democratization (shall we call it?) has been going on for some time. Step into the twentieth-century section of the Gallery, and where the first face that caught your eye might once have been that of Vaughan Williams or John Maynard Keynes, you are liable to find yourself confronted by sports stars, fashion designers, television personalities. The Gallery's portrait of Auden now hangs alongside a particularly glitzy portrait of the pop singer Elton John, in a room dominated by a large picture of Paul McCartney. And meanwhile notable figures from the past have been relegated or removed. Mrs. Gaskell, for example, has been packed off to a branch of the Gallery in Wales.

There is no need, perhaps, to cite further instances of the way in which new values have taken hold in old places. To do so might seem to be laboring the point. Yet part of the point is the sheer number of such instances. They keep streaming in, day after day, from all directions. A famous school, Harrow—Churchill's old school, and Byron's—builds its own theater: the first play the pupils perform in it is *Angels in America*. The Post Office turns down requests for a commemorative stamp marking the centenary of William Morris in favor of a stamp celebrating a television puppet of the 1950s called Muffin the Mule. It isn't some eager new university but a Cambridge college that elects Emma Thompson an honorary fellow. It isn't some fly-by-night publisher but Faber and Faber that gives a rock guitarist a place on the editorial board.

The most effective remedy for our cultural discontents is naturally education—or rather it would be, if one didn't know better. Never has it been more up to teachers to defend high culture and protect what is worth preserving from the past. Never have so many of them gloried in not doing so.

The most effective remedy for our cultural discontents is naturally education—or it would be, if one didn't know better. Never has it been more up to teachers to defend high culture and protect what is worth preserving from the past. Never have so many of them gloried in not doing so.

The situation, one must concede, is complicated. Consider the academic study of history. Readers of *The New Criterion* don't need to be told about the troubles that beset it in America, and similar problems are far from unknown in England. Neo-Marxists toil in their vineyards, Michel Foucault casts a long shadow, radical feminists go about their appointed tasks. But there are powerful countervailing forces as well. History remains a flourishing dis-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cipline in Britain: to take only one example, this year has seen the publication of a remarkable history of Europe, which would have been done credit to any age, by the British historian Norman Davies. As long as such books appear, it would be absurd to launch into a wholesale jeremiad.

Publicity can be misleading, too. Penguin Books is bringing out a multivolume history of Britain, to replace the one which they published in the years following World War II (and which has been a standby for students ever since). In his initial announcement, the general editor, David Cannadine, made it sound as though it was going to be ruthlessly revisionist, cutting Britain down to size, written from the perspective of a small island rather than that of a former power with global pretensions. This is quite a popular line at present. It suits the national mood of masochism; one suspects that it also plays rather well in America. In reality, one need hardly add, no serious British historian has been in danger of writing triumphalist or imperialist history for a very long time. So one gritted one's teeth and waited. But the first two volumes of the project—on the seventeenth century and the twentieth century—have now appeared, and they turn out to be solid, straightforward, and quite free from any taint of trendiness.

Professional historians must be left to fight their battles among themselves. More important, for society as a whole, is the teaching of history in schools, and the general hum and buzz of historical awareness in the world at large. Here—witness the Gallup survey, witness those television quizzes—there is undoubted cause for gloom. The history taught in British state schools is now mostly confined to recent times. In foreign affairs, it tends to be history of the we-were-wrong variety, in domestic affairs it puts disproportionate emphasis on "history from below." It attaches greater value to empathy than to facts: children are supposed to explore and find out for themselves (with a few nudges toward the Left). A British newspaper, commenting on the number of younger respondents to the Gallup survey who didn't know about the Armada, suggested that there were only two possibilities: either they hadn't been taught about it at all, or they had simply been told that there had been an Anglo-Spanish naval engagement, and then asked to write an essay expressing the feelings of the widow of a Spanish sailor.

There may be worse to come. The crisis in history-teaching is part of a more general breakdown of standards in education; it is all of a piece with the policy of dismissing instruction in punctuation and grammar as "hegemonic," or the belief that you empower children by not correcting their mistakes. But history has also been specifically targeted. There have been proposals for removing it from the school syllabus altogether; and if that sounds far-fetched, consider the recent experience of Spain. There is at present no teaching of history in Spanish schools, although the government is planning to reinstate it as soon as possible: it was abolished by the previous government, led by the Socialist Felipe González, and replaced by a cooked-up course (for students between the ages twelve and sixteen) labeled "social sciences." According to the new Spanish minister for education and culture, Esperanza Aguirre, it wasn't until she began examining the situation in detail that its full bleakness was brought home to her—that she realized that there was now no reason why a Spanish schoolchild should ever learn of the existence of Julius Caesar, for example. (It is somewhat droll, given the revelations about British ignorance of the Armada, that another figure she should cite—but she was speaking to a British journalist, so perhaps she was teasing—was Sir Francis Drake: "A Spanish child has a right to learn about Drake. And about the galleons he looted.")

As for the positive content of the social sciences course, it turns out, according to Señora Aguirre, to be even more slanted than one might have supposed. The text-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

books prepared for it are littered with references to neo-colonialism and "the crisis in the liberal-bourgeois world." A section on "the evolution of ideology after the Second World War" contains expositions of Marxism and existentialism, but capitalism is mentioned only in connection with such topics as Third World debt.

It seems to me unlikely (though you can never be sure) that the Spanish experiment will be attempted in Britain, and if it were, I doubt whether it would have the effect its architects intended. The chief effect of dismantling old-style education, as far as I can make out, has not been to create an appetite for new-style education, but to create an even bigger vacuum for "youth culture" to rush in and fill. A student who has been force-fed Marxism and existentialism is more likely than ever, once he escapes, to take refuge in the excitements of rock and pop (and possibly even stronger substances).

The manufacturers of popular entertainment still show a certain fitful interest in the past, but much less of one than formerly; and one isn't necessarily inclined to feel grateful to them when they do. If I may intrude a personal note, I recently went back, for the first time for over thirty years, to take a look at the house where I spent my early childhood: it is now a video store, and the window was dominated by a life-size cut-out of Kevin Costner as Robin Hood. (Costner may well be an even bigger star in Europe than in America: "Kevin" is currently the most popular boy's name in France.) A lowering experience—though no doubt we can survive a politically correct version of Robin Hood, just as we can survive the hostile caricatures of British officials in the latest Disney version of *The Jungle Book*. The distortions and anti-English bias of a Hollywood movie like *Braveheart* (about the Scottish hero William Wallace) are more serious, however, and those of a movie like *Michael Collins* positively pernicious. It shouldn't be forgotten, in fact, that the future of the European past is partly being shaped in America. And when it comes to education proper, and the recent decision that New York schoolchildren should be taught that the Irish famine of the 1840s was on a par with the Holocaust,

The chief effect of dismantling old-style education, as far as I can make out, has not been to create an appetite for new-style education, but to create an even bigger vacuum for "youth culture" to rush in and fill.

what can we do but throw up our hands? (One place where this decision has excited interest, not surprisingly, is Germany, and it is a sign of the way media culture tends to work, even in the most distinguished quarters, that the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* should have commissioned an article about it, not from one of the many excellent Irish or English historians who would have been available, but from the literary critic and republican sympathizer Terry Eagleton.)

Meanwhile, there is still a lively public interest in history, and in many respects it is still very well catered for. Every week, for example, large numbers of people visit the historic homes administered by the National Trust (though they don't always win the approval of their intellectual betters for doing so: Jonathan Miller, with his inimitable command of metaphor, has said that the British would "walk through a lake of pus" in order to see a country house). Again, serious historical exhibitions are still packed and serious historical biographies still figure prominently on publishers' lists: a leading daily paper can still run a series extending over several weeks on the latest state of knowledge about Roman Britain. And there are still serious historical programs on television, if you know where to look for them—though they tend to be shown at unsociable hours, and you can't help feeling that they have an increasingly old-fashioned air. A better guide to the fu-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ture is probably the history channel on British satellite television, in which "history" all too often turns out to be what would once have been called current affairs, with a strong dash of show business. As I write, for example, half the current week's schedule consists of biographical programs; the subjects are George Bush, Saddam Hussein, Sherlock Holmes, Lord Mountbatten, Hillary Clinton, O.J. Simpson, Yitzak Rabin, Jules Verne, Audrey Hepburn, and Buffalo Bill. You wonder whether they will ever get round to the ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit.

The same triumph of short-term memory can be widely observed in other areas—in the study of literature, for example. It isn't uncommon to read about such things as the recent case of the headmaster whose school was accused of neglecting serious literature, and who protested that, far from it, his pupils were actually studying the classics: "this year we're doing Shakespeare and Sylvia Plath." No educational reformer, as far as I know, has yet proposed that schools should drop the literature of the past completely, but as time goes by poor Shakespeare has more and more had to shoulder the burden of representing it all by himself—or at most with a little assistance from Jane Austen or Hardy. Nor is the situation very different in the lower reaches of the British university system. It is now possible to study English at college level and emerge ignorant of almost everything written before the twentieth century.

It is against this background that some critics have found consolation in the recent wave of movies and television series based on literary classics. For sterner spirits, even the best of these adaptations, though they plainly vary a great deal in merit, are irreparably marred by anachronisms and false notes: they represent a betrayal. There are two irreconcilable doctrines—either "something is better than nothing," or "nothing but the best will do"—and I must admit that, like many people, I find myself caught between them. Fortunately, however, this isn't a major problem. If you don't like the adaptations, the books themselves are still there, waiting to be read without benefit of a go-between.

In the theater, on the other hand, the question of interpretation is inescapable, and in recent years, while I have been working as a drama critic, hardly a week has gone by without my being forced to consider our relationship—and responsibilities—to the art of the past. Some of the productions of classics that I see are admirable (and they include productions of minor classics that theatergoers haven't had a chance to see for generations). Many of them, however, are disfigured by the kind of gimmicks that go by the flattering name of "concepts" among their admirers, and quite a few are insulting travesties of the works which they purport to present. Time after time, though I ought to know better by now, I settle down hoping to see *King Lear*, or *The Tempest*, or *Hamlet*, and find myself watching a Lear who starts off (in Act One, Scene One) in a wheelchair, playing silly games, or an Ariel who ends up spitting in Prospero's face, or an Ophelia whose dress is stained with menstrual blood—you know the kind of thing. And it isn't only Shakespeare who suffers in this way. Lady Bracknell turns up played by a drag queen; Congreve's *The Way of the World* is acted out amid rubbish stuffed into black plastic bags.

Even the most unlikely candidates are given a going-over. The other day, for instance, I saw a production of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, which is one of Bernard Shaw's earliest plays, and one of his better ones. It was a good production, for the most part, but in case we should think he lacked originality the director had brought the action forward from the 1890s to the 1920s, and a hundred social nuances were lost in the process.

Still, Shakespeare remains the prime victim of "innovations," and one disastrous production stays in my mind in particular—partly because of the initial sympathy with which I approached it, partly because of its subsequent reception. Since the advent of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the National Theatre, and the establishment of a permanent base for the Royal Shakespeare Company in London, Shakespeare has seldom been produced in the West End, and when a Shaftesbury Avenue management decided to stage *Much Ado About Nothing* several years back, it was the first Shakespeare production on that celebrated theatrical thoroughfare for forty years. I found it hard not to feel well disposed toward it in advance; in addition, my hopes were colored by memories of a magnificent production of the same play with John Geilgud that I had seen in the West End when I was young. But alas, this time Benedick had a droopy little moustache, capered around like a slapstick comedian in a silent movie, and spoke with a thick Ulster accent which bore no relation to the way anyone else spoke. Beatrice was a slattern who made her first entrance stuffing her mouth with a banana. "Sigh No More, Ladies" was turned into a square dance, complete with gingham dresses and jeans.

Modern theater directors, like other modern artists and intellectuals, are frequently engaged in selling an apocalyptic or anarchic version of the world which doesn't bear much relation to the way most people live—which probably doesn't bear much relation to the way most of them live themselves.

The subtleties of the play were wrecked. The poetry went out the window.

That the production received some enthusiastic reviews didn't altogether surprise me. What was dismaying, on the other hand, was that it rapidly became that comparatively rare thing in the contemporary theater, a hit with the young. Friends told me that it had aroused an enthusiasm for Shakespeare in their children which they had never hoped to see. After I had made some uncomplimentary remarks about it in the course of a talk, a woman in the audience came up to to me with a stricken look: she was a schoolteacher who had taken her class to see it, and if I only knew what it was usually like trying to get young people interested . . . How could I fail to feel a twinge of sympathy? But whatever the young people were getting out of it, I don't think it was Shakespeare. There are times when something is less than nothing.

And what is the updating and relocating of plays that takes place in the theater all about? Occasionally, it serves a clear political purpose. Not long ago, for example, there was a big production of Euripides' *Trojan Women* at the National Theatre, in which the Trojans (good) were presented as an array of international types, while the Greeks (bad) were uniformed Americans straight from Vietnam. But this kind of direct equation is less common than it used to be. Most of the juggling of periods and styles (as in the *Much Ado*) is far more wanton and arbitrary. There is logic in a doublet-and-hose production of Shakespeare (which is about the most revolutionary thing anyone could propose at present), or in a production which reflects a play's setting (Romans wearing togas), or in a modern-dress production, but most contemporary productions are none of these things. Instead, they abound in strange juxtapositions. A duchess who might have stepped out of a Renaissance painting chain-smokes, while her brother is got up like a Ruritanian general. Russian boyars jostle with Edwardian clubmen and Italian *fascisti*. If half the Romans wear togas, the other half seem to be serving under Napoleon. Motorbikes appear from nowhere. Knights wear armor, when they are not sporting black leather, and humble folk shuffle along in what a colleague of mine calls "old overcoats." The preferred term in the trade for all this is "mixed period." The effect is a mishmash.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It may seem odd, given the semi-Marxist ideas that float around in the theater, that there aren't more attempts by directors to set Shakespeare in his social context. If there were, we would surely see more Elizabethan-dress productions. But perhaps the Marxism doesn't go very deep, and it would be truer to talk of a vague amorphous leftism. At all events, the impression we are left with by most modern productions of his work, and of other classics, is of the past as an impossible jumble. " 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone."

A great deal of this reflects the desire to break things rather than the reality of breakage. Modern theater directors, like other modern artists and intellectuals (to say nothing of sub-artists and sub-intellectuals), are frequently engaged in selling an apocalyptic or anarchic version of the world which doesn't bear much relation to the way most people live—which probably doesn't bear much relation to the way most of them live themselves. Still, they find a widespread echo; and if they are part of the problem, that only means that the problem is even bigger than it would have been without them. We should do everything we can to resist the false diagnoses, the meretricious solutions, the revolutionary zeal of people who still haven't learned the lessons of the past eighty years; but in the end we are still liable to be left with the sensation of living in a society that is adrift, a society which has lost its narrative thread.

This is a condition which, however reluctantly, I believe we have got to learn to live with. We can work to defend what is left of our civic culture, and to restore some of what has been lost; but any panacea that is proposed for our disorders is likely to turn out to be much worse than the disease. I don't think we should underestimate the potential for tyranny that lurks in our society. Today's demagogue remains tomorrow's gauleiter. Today's ideologue remains tomorrow's commissar.

As for the future of the European past, it seems to me too big a question to admit of a coherent answer. The one thing we can safely predict about the past is that there is no going back to it. Beyond that, I think it probable that the culture of a federal Europe will grow steadily less European, in any traditional sense. There will be no shortage of festivals and galas and cultural commissions, but they will be synthetic, without roots. But I could be wrong, and meanwhile we can still learn from the past, and learn about it, and try to defend its achievements from the depredations of pop, postmodernism, and all the other forces ranged against them. There are endless battles to be fought, even if we lack a grand strategy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Corot in New York

by Roger Kimball

Tous les demi-savants, après avoir consciencieusement admiré un tableau de Corot, et lui avoir loyalement payé leur tribut d'éloges, trouvent que cela pèche par l'exécution, et s'accordent en ceci, que définitivement M. Corot ne sait pas peindre.—Braves gens! qui ignorent d'abord qu'une oeuvre de génie . . . une oeuvre d'âme—où tout est bein vu, bien observé, bien compris, bien imaginé—toujours très bien exécutée . . .

—Baudelaire, *Curiosités Esthétiques*

We went to Corot's studio. . . . Corot is a true artist. One needs to see a painter in his own place to have an idea of his merit. I saw there, and appreciated in quite a different way, pictures which I had seen in the Salon and which had made but a moderate impression on me.

—Delacroix, *Journals (1847)*

In 1795, the year before the French painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot was born, the German poet-philosopher Friedrich Schiller published the beginning sections of his famous essay *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* ("On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry"). Schiller sought in that essay to distinguish between "two entirely different modes of poetry" and, by extension, two entirely different relations to nature and ways of looking at the world. It is worth stressing that Schiller did not intend "naïve" as a term of disparagement. Far from it. By "naïve" he meant not a deficiency of perception (as we generally do when using the word) but rather an immediacy of perception. For Schiller, the naïve poet was lacking not in insight but in calculation. He adduces Homer and Shakespeare as historical models, and he clearly had Goethe in mind as a contemporary example of "naïve" genius—genius that "triumphs over the complications of art by simplicity," proceeding "not by the accepted principles, but by flashes of insight and feeling."

Schiller likewise used the term "sentimental" in an idiosyncratic sense. The sentimental poet—in whose ranks Schiller arrayed himself—is one who entertains not false emotions but elegiac ones: cut off from the immediate enjoyment of nature by self-consciousness, he longs to recapture it. "The poet," Schiller wrote, "either *is* nature or he will *seek* her. The former is the naïve, the latter the sentimental poet."

The complicated and highly artificial nature of modern society, Schiller thought, encouraged the sentimental (in his special sense) and made the appearance of naïve poets a vanishing rarity. The naïve in general he associated with childhood and its spontaneous, unselfconscious enjoyment of nature; the sentimental he associated with the reflective craving for these benisons. When we ask what is so pleasing to us about the contemplation of "a modest flower, a stream, a mossy stone, the chirping of birds, the humming of bees, etc.," Schiller answers that they represent not only "our lost childhood, which . . . fills us with a certain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

melancholy," but also the ideal of prospective freedom and unity, which affords us "the sweetest enjoyment of our humanity as an idea." In other words, such simple contemplation of nature reveals a moral as well as an aesthetic ideal, the ideal of a life unblemished by conflict, limitation, and stormy self-consciousness.

Among important nineteenth-century artists, perhaps none has the reputation of fulfilling Schiller's ideal of naïve genius more fully than Corot, whose bicentennial this year has sparked renewed interest in his art and has provided the occasion for an ambitious traveling retrospective and other exhibitions centered around his work.

As of this writing, New York is the home to three such events. The largest is "Corot" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the last stop for a retrospective of some 160 paintings representing every phase and direction of Corot's long and prolific career.[1] At the Brooklyn Museum is "In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting," a collection of 130 paintings of the Italian landscape in and around Rome and Naples by forty-eight European artists.[2] Featuring nineteen small pictures painted by Corot on his first trip to Italy in the late 1820s, "In the Light of Italy" comprises works painted between 1780 and 1840. It includes canvases by Corot's first teacher, the precocious and ill-fated Achille-Etna Michallon (1796–1822), and several important works by Michallon's teacher, the Neoclassical academician Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819), whose influential theories on landscape painting Corot imbibed in his formative years as an artist. Finally, there is a small but exquisite exhibition of some thirty late paintings by Corot at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries in Manhattan; several of these works, which date from the mid-1840s, are for sale and nearly all represent Corot at his most concentrated and intense.[3]

Corot has always been an enormously popular artist. He was once so popular, indeed, that even his immense output—the *catalogue raisonné* by Corot's friend Alfred Robaut lists upwards of 2,500 objects—could not satisfy the demand for his painting; consequently, his work has the distinction of being among the most frequently forged in history. The art historian René Huyghe was the first to quip, in 1936, that "Corot painted three thousand canvases, ten thousand of which have been sold in America." This is an exaggeration—but the point remains. One notorious collection alone contained over 2,414 fake Corots.

Corot's popularity also helps to explain why he has so frequently been associated with fashionable artistic schools or movements in which he doesn't really belong. For example, Corot is often nominated as an honorary Barbizon painter; but, although he made many pictures in and around Fontainebleau, his dreamy, often nymph-filled

1 "Corot" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on October 29, 1996, and remains on view through January 19, 1997. The show was first seen at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris (February 27–May 27, 1996), and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (June 21–September 22, 1996). A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Vincent Pomarède, Michael Pantazzi, and Gary Tinterow, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams (496 pages, $60; $45 paper).

2 "In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting" opened at the Brooklyn Museum on October 11, 1996, and will remain on view through January 12, 1997. The show was first seen at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (May 26–September 2, 1996), and will travel to the Saint Louis Art Museum (February 21–May 18, 1997). A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Philip Conisbee, Sarah Faunce, Jeremy Strick, and Vincent Pomarède, has been published by the National Gallery of Art and Yale University Press (288 pages, $50; $27 paper).

3 "Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot: Late Paintings" opens at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, on December 5, 1996, and will remain on view through January 13, 1997. A catalogue of the exhibition, written by Martin Dieterle, has been published by Salander-O'Reilly Galleries (48 pages, $20).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

paintings are really very different in mood and ambition from the anti-Neoclassical *plein-air* landscapes of central Barbizon figures like Théodore Rousseau or Jules Dupré.

Again, Corot's landscapes, especially his late, silvery *Souvenirs*, are often cited as proto-Impressionist works. There is no doubt that many of the Impressionists greatly admired Corot. The catalogue for the exhibition at the Met begins with famous statements by Monet and Degas as epigraphs: "There is only one master here—Corot," Monet said in 1897: "We are nothing compared to him, nothing." And Degas, not someone given to making excessively generous comments about other artists, declared in 1883 that Corot "is the strongest of us all, he foresaw everything."

Whatever the Impressionists may have taken from Corot, the truth is that Corot did not, like the Impressionists, seek to render his visual impressions as purely and directly as possible; rather—in his landscapes, anyway—he showed himself to be the descendent of Claude: he poetically reinterpreted his impressions, populating many of his canvases with figures from myth or private fancy and suffusing them with a light that is true less to an optical than to an interior reality. "After my outings," Corot noted,

> I invite Nature to come spend several days with me; that is when my madness begins. Brush in hand, I look for hazelnuts among the trees in my studio; I hear birds singing there, trees trembling in the wind; I see rushing streams and rivers laden with a thousand reflections of sky and earth; the sun sets and rises in my studio.

It is in this sense that Clement Greenberg, writing in 1942, was right to compare Corot to "a symbolist poet," who "does not try to create a specific world but rather to awaken in the spectator limitless associations, muting the contrasts of light and dark lest things become too definite."

It is a testimony to Corot's specifically artistic vitality that aspects of his work have appealed to temperaments that differed radically from his own. Corot was no more a Realist than he was an Impressionist—much less, in fact; and yet there are Realist elements in some of his paintings and we know that his works held a great fascination for Courbet (and vice versa: Corot greatly admired Courbet). In 1866, Emile Zola impatiently wrote that "if M. Corot could kill, once and for all, the nymphs of his woods and replace them with peasants, I should like him beyond measure." What is surprising is not the existence of such complaints—and Zola's was hardly unique—but that Corot's reputation rose above them essentially unscathed.

There are technical, painterly reasons for Corot's widespread appeal: the misty modulations of light in his late landscapes attracted the Impressionists; the stripped-down modeling and simplifications of his Italian landscapes and his figure paintings attracted modernists from Gauguin and Van Gogh to Cézanne, Juan Gris, and Picasso. It is easy, for example, to see why the young Picasso admired Corot's dark, brooding *Mademoiselle de Foudras*, a remarkable late portrait from 1872 that Picasso copied in 1920.

But another reason for Corot's popularity lies in the appeal of the naïve in a "sentimental"—that is to say a deeply unsettled—age. "The naïve," Schiller wrote, "is childlikeness where it is no longer expected." Corot lived in an age of great artistic and political ferment. Who could have expected his composure, his delicacy, his tranquil perseverance? The revolution of 1848; the *Salon des Refusés* in 1863; the Franco-Prussian War in 1870–71; the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874, the year before Corot died: what is remarkable is not that Corot's painting changed and evolved, especially from the late 1840s on, but that it displayed an essential serenity throughout.

In his important essay on Corot in *The*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Development of Modern Art (1905), the German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe repeatedly stressed the childlike element in Corot's character and his art. Corot worked playfully, Meier-Graefe noted, with a "fancy characteristic of boyhood." And although he was a year older than Delacroix, "nothing of the wild period"—the excess, the galloping Romanticism—"had touched him. A virginal soul dwelt in the sturdy body." Corot was, Meier-Graefe concludes, "a child; we cannot describe his nature more exactly."

These elements in Corot's character (and work) can be overstressed. But the essential picture is correct. Cheerfulness was always breaking in. Corot's art, Meier-Graefe wrote, "was like a smiling, well-protected coast, on which the waves ripple gently and never break in fury." No doubt his sense of security had its origin in part in Corot's circumstances and upbringing. Corot was born in Paris, the second of three children and only son of increasingly well-to-do merchants. His mother was a fashionable milliner of Swiss origin, his father the son of a wigmaker who ably ran his wife's business, catering to the *beau monde* from a shop on the rue de Bac. A revealing portrait of Corot's mother from the mid 1830s is included in the Met exhibition. Madame Corot sits in a fashionable blue dress with puffed sleeves, one of her magnificent bonnets perched atop her dark hair, its ribbons dangling untied down to her waist. This is a businesslike rather than a maternal creature: self-possessed, competent down to the tips of her elegantly gloved hands. She leans slightly forward with an expression of wry, impatient concentration—having just sat down, one feels, or else just about to rise. Altogether a formidable lady.

Camille was sent to boarding school in Paris at the age of four and then, in 1807, to school at the Collège de Rouen. An indifferent student, he completed his formal education in Poissy in 1814 at the age of eighteen. Although he was beginning to take an interest in art, at the behest of his father he worked in the cloth trade in Paris for nearly eight years. It may be tempting to apply the cliché of young-artist-rebels-against-bourgeois-parents-with-their-obtuse-commercial-ambitions to Corot, but it wasn't like that at all. For one thing, Corot was an extremely dutiful son who didn't have a rebellious bone in his body. For another, as Vincent Pomarède observes in his excellent essay for the Met's catalogue, Corot's experience in the cloth trade "clearly contributed to the formation of his aesthetic sensibility and taste, since it meant eight years spent in the world of fashion, where texture and exact colors of fabrics matter a great deal." (Years later, toward the end of his life, Corot was delighted to discover evidence of his fame in a Parisian draper's shop selling fabric in a color called *gris-Corot*, Corot gray.)

In 1817, Corot's parents bought a property at Ville-d'Avray, near Versailles, that later provided the subject for so many landscapes. In 1822, some months after the tragic death of his younger sister, Victoire-Anne, Corot's parents presented him with a choice: they would give him his inheritance—100,000 francs—to establish him in the cloth trade on his own, or he could pursue his interest in painting and make do with the interest on Victoire-Anne's dowry—1,500 to 2,000 francs per year—as an allowance. Corot didn't hesitate. He instantly set up in a studio on the quai Voltaire (though he continued to live with his parents) and studied intensively with Achille-Etna Michallon until Michallon's untimely death from pneumonia later that year. Corot then began a three-year stint studying with Jean-Victor Bertin (1767–1842), another pupil of Valenciennes.

Physically, Corot was blessed with an exceedingly robust constitution and was as productive and energetic in his late seventies as in his fifties. An avid and tireless traveler, he lived simply and dressed, it is said, like a peasant. (So much for his mother's finery.) By all accounts, he was devoted to his family, especially to his older sister Annette-Octavie and "la belle dame," his mother, on whom he doted—and on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whom he was financially dependent—until her death in 1851.

There is a quality of fathomless silence in many of Corot's paintings, an essential stillness that impresses one as contemplative or quietly melancholic by turns. Yet Corot himself was intensely sociable, generally preferred painting with friends around him, and was remarkably generous. In 1868, when Daumier was on the point of being evicted from his apartment because he could not pay the rent, Corot bought a small house in Valmondois and gave it to him. It is also worth noting that he seems to have suffered not at all from artistic hauteur or temperament. When someone complained that one of Corot's models "prattled, sang, laughed, and didn't stay put," the painter said, "It's just that changeability that I love in her. . . . I am not one of those specialists who makes set pieces. My object is to express life. I need a model who moves around."

Meier-Graefe describes Corot as "devout" and tells us that he attended Mass regularly. Gary Tinterow notes in his essay for the Met's catalogue that in his later years Corot was accustomed to read Thomas à Kempis's devotional classic *The Imitation of Christ* before retiring. "It is this book," Corot said to a friend,

> that has helped me lead my life with such serenity and has always left me with a contented heart. It has taught me that men should not puff themselves up with pride, whether they are emperors adding this or that province to their empires or painters who gain a reputation.

Nevertheless, Corot's Catholicism was clearly of the world-affirming, Mediterranean variety. As Meier-Graefe puts it, "although a good Christian, he was not a bad Pagan Greek." So it is that, although Corot never married, he was hardly indifferent to female beauty. Writing from Rome in 1827 to a friend, he mentions an occasional dalliance with a local girl ("expensive") and dilates on the charms of Italian women: "les yeaux, les épaules, les mains et les culs sont superbes." Admitting to the same correspondent that a certain girl "pleased me greatly and still does," he explained that "I have only one goal in life that I want to pursue faithfully: to make landscapes. This firm resolution keeps me from a serious attachment." For some, the spectacle of Corot's apparently unflappable contentment was an irritation. Writing in 1855, when Corot was widely celebrated, Edmond de Goncourt fumed that the painter was

> the happy man par excellence. When he is painting, happy to paint; when he is not painting, happy to rest. Happy with his modest fortune before he inherited; happy with his inheritance when he inherited. Happy to live in obscurity when he was unknown; happy with his successes . . .

and, Goncourt sneered, happy with his models: "et tirant tous les mois son coup avec quelque sale modèle qui vient le voir."

The catty Goncourt is not necessarily a reliable witness. But it is certainly true that Corot's otherworldliness can be overstated. Reflecting critically on the common use of the word "chaste" to describe Corot's pictures, Meier-Graefe warns that "in Corot we find neither negation nor affirmation of the sexual element, but that higher virtue, which first demands beauty from what is sensual, before inquiring whether it is moral: the purity of the healthy." It is instructive in this regard to compare Corot's reclining nudes, the earliest of which dates from the late 1830s, with Manet's *Olympia* (1865). In Corot, sensuality has a voluptuous, inviting, slightly dreamlike quality, whereas in Manet the flesh, like the light, is wide awake, challenging, predatory.

In a much-quoted passage from his 1853 monograph on Corot, the painter's friend Théophile Silvestre noted that "Corot sometimes exaggerates even to himself the cheerfulness of his character, while I see the melancholy so often present in his work and the expression of sadness that occasionally

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

takes possession of his features." Again, though, it is a dreamy, seductive melancholy one senses in Corot's work. In a letter written in 1835, when he was thirty-nine, Corot hinted at some nameless sorrow and confided that his spirits "now lean toward sadness and melancholy." But such expostulations are extremely rare in Corot's correspondence, and one comes away feeling that whatever sadnesses he experienced were soon incorporated into an overarching spirit of affirmation, shadows necessary to set off an abiding luminosity.

Corot's career really began to take root during his extended three-year trip to Italy (the first of three trips) from 1825 to 1828. This was a period of intense study, absorption, and painterly consolidation, the time when he definitively emerged from his artistic apprenticeship. Meier-Graefe spoke of Corot as "one of those wonder-children, who are born with a sense of form." At least, it was a sense he soon acquired. Corot wrote to friends about being "absolutely tormented" in his struggle to capture the Italian light. To another correspondent he wrote that the more progress he made the more difficulties he encountered: "There are certain aspects of painting that I would like to deal with but that seem to me impenetrable." Still, on the evidence of the remarkably fluent and harmonious pictures in the Brooklyn exhibition and pictures like the Phillips Collection's *View from the Farnese Gardens: Morning* (1826) at the Met, these were struggles in which Corot was ultimately victorious.

Corot always placed a great premium on spontaneity. In a notebook entry made in Rome circa 1828, he wrote that "I have noticed that whatever is finished at one sitting is fresher, better drawn, and profits from many lucky accidents, while when one retouches this initial harmonious glow is lost." There are some remarkable pictures made in a single sitting, including a small gem on view at Salander-O'Reilly. But in fact Corot often took great pains and many sessions to achieve the freshness and harmonious glow he sought. Vincent Pomarède describes a four-stage process:

> He began outdoors, blocking in the subject fairly completely, usually in pencil but sometimes in oil; then in the studio, using oils, he repainted from memory, making the drawing and the effects of light and shadow more precise; next he returned to the site to analyze in detail various elements of the landscape; finally he retouched the painting in the studio, sometimes over a period of years.

Spontaneity, or at least the look of spontaneity, is sometimes achieved through painstaking and meticulous labor.

Corot began exhibiting regularly at the Salon in 1827 and had his first notable success in 1835 with *Hagar in the Wilderness*, now in the Met. This large canvas (nearly six by eight feet) is an ambitious Biblical scene in which the figures—a despairing Hagar, the infant Ishmael, and, floating off in the distance, a ministering angel—are dwarfed by a parched and desolate landscape. It is a forceful but not, to my mind, an especially likable picture. In any event, it is hardly the sort of picture that we associate with Corot; indeed, as Meier-Graefe noted, "we scarcely recognize Corot here." It is, in fact, one of the curiosities of Corot's career that many of the works that first made his reputation now seem secondary, while some of the works we most admire were ignored or even scorned when they were first exhibited.

By the late 1840s, Corot's reputation was firmly established. But his path to success was not unencumbered. In 1843, for example, his submissions (notably the melodramatic *Destruction of Sodom*) were rejected by the Salon. He was nominated for the Legion of Honor in 1846 (at the news of which, Corot's father wondered whether he should increase his son's allowance), but never received a first-class medal from the Salon. In fact, as Michael Pantazzi notes in his essay for the Met catalogue, "In a world used to official rewards," Corot's recognition was "inadequate." "State patronage,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which was less than enthusiastic for an artist of Corot's stature, ceased in 1851 after the purchase of five pictures."

The growth of Corot's reputation really took place slightly to one side of the established system of patronage and reward. He made his first important sale in 1839 to the duc d'Orléans, but it was the enthusiasm of certain critics and fellow artists that assured Corot's stature. Already in 1845, Baudelaire had singled him out as the leader of the modern school of landscape painters. In 1851 Philippe de Chennevières called him "the greatest landscape painter of our time," and in 1853 Nadar referred to Corot as "always and eternally the master."

What is it in Corot's painting that elicited such enthusiasm? Meier-Graefe noted that "tone was Corot's great medium," "the Alpha and Omega of his development." If he was sometimes called "the Rembrandt of the open air," it was because, like Rembrandt, he made color out of a subtle modulation of light and shade. Baudelaire perceived something similar when, writing about the Salon of 1846, he noted that Corot was "plutôt un harmoniste qu'un coloriste," a harmonist rather than a colorist. In a notebook entry from 1870, Corot himself put it this way:

> What there is to see in painting, or rather what I am looking for, is the form, the whole, the value of the tones. . . . That is why for me the color comes after, because I love more than anything the overall effect, the harmony of the tones, while color gives you a kind of shock that I don't like.

Corot's mastery of "tone," his skill as a visual "harmoniste," is perhaps most obvious in his great, light-diffused landscapes, beginning with his 1850 masterpiece, *Une Matinée*, also called *La Danse des nymphes*, which is now in the Musée d'Orsay. This remarkable work, which has been cited as a possible source for Cézanne's *Bathers*, is a kind of Dance to the Music of Time à la Claude. It also, as the Met's catalogue notes, "represented the turning point toward Corot's late, vaporous manner and an increasing reliance on dramatic effects of mood, the culmination of a development begun ten years before" with Corot's Virgilian idylls, e.g., *Paysage; soleil couchant* (1840).

Not all of Corot's masterly experiments in harmony were immediate successes. One of his greatest masterpieces, *Paysage avec figures* (also called *La Toilette*), was declared "middling antique" by one critic when it was first exhibited in the 1859 Salon. But this fabulous picture, from a private collection in Paris, is one of Corot's proudest achievements. Measuring about three by five feet, it presents a gentle wooded scene, a medley of silhouetted browns and greens and yellows; in the foreground, a seated nude turns three-quarters toward the viewer. Her left arm is raised with her hand on the back of her head, her right arm is cocked to hold a dangling tress; standing over her from behind an attending maid bends slightly to help fix her hair. The nude's gaze slyly rises to meet our eyes in an attitude of composed query: there is recognition, even perhaps acknowledgment, but it registers from a seemingly unbridgeable distance. Behind and to the right, leaning against a tree, is another female figure absorbed in a book.

Corot was obviously fascinated by the spectacle of absorbed concentration that reading figures—particularly female figures—presented. "Nobody," Pantazzi notes, "painted so many books." *Une Liseuse* (1869–70), *La Lecture interrompue* (1870–73): in such pictures of women reading, or having just been interrupted reading, Corot uses books as something more than props: they are symbols of enchantment. Reading, in which we absent ourselves partially from the press of everyday life, provided a kind of intellectual correlative to the sort of experience Corot sought, with increasing success, to recreate in his gauzy landscapes: an experience of unity, of the timeless within time, the Arcadian ideal instituted in the precincts of contemporary life.

In any event, despite its lukewarm recep-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion, Corot rated *La Toilette* very highly indeed, no doubt partly because of the immense efforts he expended on it. "You see the pains I take to hide the attachment [of the muscles] at the clavicles and sternum," Corot recalled,

> to soften the modeling of the ribs where it seems that the breasts just begin to swell; I try to go about it entirely differently from the usual way. . . . As this is not an anatomy lesson, I must bind together as seen in nature everything covering the armatures that make up and support the body, in order to put down only what I experience faced with these tissues of flesh that let one sense the blood beneath while they reflect the light of the sky.

The result of this effort to indite his experience is an exquisitely balanced tone poem in which a beguiling sensuousness is is held in delicate, reflective suspension.

Some of Corot's later, more atmospheric landscapes are less sensual but perhaps even more beguiling. To be sure, Corot flirted with what Meier-Graefe called a species of mannerism in some of his silvery dreamscapes. But the best of them resist mannerism with a suave tautness of composition and subtle modulation of tone. In *L'Etoile du berger* (1864), for example, or the justly famous *Souvenir de Mortefontaine* (1864), bought by Louis-Napoleon and now in the Louvre, Corot achieves an all-over unity of effect—a perfectly modulated surface—in which tone, form, and subject matter meld into one another in an expression of articulate visual yearning: a harmony of contrasts so skillful that it seems to resolve itself into a single note.

Corot's mastery of tone and skill as a visual harmonist are evident in paintings other than his mist-filled landscapes. Indeed, Meier-Graefe rather deprecates these works in favor of some of Corot's figure paintings, in which the tonal control is perhaps less blatant but just as consummate. Among the most famous are *Femme à la perle* (1858–68)—the decoration is actually a leaf, not a pearl—and *La Dame en bleu* (1874), both from the Louvre. Writing about the latter, Meier-Graefe called it "a perfect parure in blue," noting that the striking effect of the blue dress was due as much to Corot's subtle brushwork as to the color itself. *La Dame en bleu* is another "un-Corot-like" Corot, Corot in the tradition of Gainsborough, on the one hand, and looking forward to astringencies of Manet (an artist Corot didn't care for), on the other.

Corot's greatest strengths—his unfailing sense of composition, his mastery of tone, his "poetry"—have also been held against him by critics who insisted on a different standard of pictorial accuracy. "Poetry," after all, can conceal a multitude of evils, or at least incapacities, in a painter. But Clement Greenberg was right that "there have been very few painters more fully in possession of their craft." As some of his figure paintings show, Corot was technically capable of optical verisimilitude; but he was generally after other qualities, deeper accuracies. As he put it in a notebook, "I never hurry to arrive at details; the masses and the character of a picture interest me before anything else." Curiously, his avid interest in the young art of photography reinforced this preference for masses and tone over detail: it was the spectrum of grays and revelation of tonality that Corot responded to in photography, not its anatomy of detail.

The catalogue for "Corot" at the Met notes that this is the first American retrospective of Corot's work in thirty-five years. The curators—Vincent Pomarède, Michael Pantazzi, and Gary Tinterow—are right that "a thorough reappraisal of his work is clearly long overdue." It is a pity, then, that this ambitious exhibition is such a serious disappointment. But a disappointment it is—as well as a missed opportunity. An occasion for a Corot retrospective on this scale will not come again soon. All the elements were in place: an intelligent and informative catalogue, a long list of masterpieces, but the *tout ensemble* just doesn't come off.

Why? The curators themselves give a clue

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when they note in their introduction that they sought to represent "every aspect" of Corot's painted oeuvre in their retrospective. A "different kind of exhibition might have shown Corot only at his most ravishing," they note, but they insist that this would have been "deceptive" because a "fundamental aspect of Corot's work is that his drawing is sometimes awkward, his compositions sometimes formulaic." Well, it is certainly true that the curators have treated viewers to some second- and third-rank Corots in this exhibition: some are mere curiosities, like *Soissons: House and Factory of Mr. Henry* (1833) or *Cow in a Stable* (1840–45), others simply imperfectly realized works.

But the real problem with this exhibition is its pedantic didacticism. This is not an exhibition designed to be looked at but rather one to be dissected: striving to make a point about Corot it overlooks . . . Corot. In the end, a successful exhibition of Corot's painting must to some extent emulate his own practice. That is to say, it must seek a unity or at least a harmony of tone; it cannot subordinate—as the Met exhibition does—the visual experience of the painting to lectures on why a particular work was or was not well received at the Salon in a given year. Moreover, a successful exhibition of Corot's painting must make some effort to preserve the atmosphere of his distinctive aesthetic achievement: "Corot" fails at this abysmally. The curators of "Corot" tell us that Alfred Barr, the founder of the Museum of Modern Art, once predicted that Corot's influence on twentieth-century art would be as great as Cézanne's. We may think it a pity that Alfred Barr does not seem to have been right in this prediction. But the evidence of "Corot" gives us little understanding of why this great connoisseur of modern art should have thought Corot so potent a force to begin with.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Melville in the try-pots

by James W. Tuttleton

If the acutest sage be often at his wits' end to understand living character, shall those who are not sages expect to run and read character in those mere phantoms which flit along a page, like shadows along a wall?
—Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man*

How shall we read the character of Herman Melville (1819–1891)? For many years the conventional view was that he rose to international fame on the basis of *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), two tales of idyllic life among the Polynesians of the South Seas; that he attained his greatest literary achievement in a book that bombed with most readers and critics of the day, the epic whaling adventure *Moby-Dick* (1851); and then, after a series of nervous disorders and experimental disasters highlighted by *Pierre* (1852) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), he all but disappeared from critical view.

There is a measure of truth in this poignant reading. Melville stopped publishing novels in the late 1850s after it became clear that he could not provide for his wife and family with his writing. Even writing short stories like "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby the Scrivener" failed to support him. Consequently, he had to go to work as an inspector in the customhouse in New York City, and, when he died in 1891, most people who remembered his books at all thought that "the man who had lived among the cannibals" in the 1840s had died decades before.

Although Melville largely withdrew from the literary life of New York City, he never actually stopped writing. When the fiction he wanted to write could find no audience in the age of domestic sentimentalism—a time when novels like *St. Elmo*, *The Lamplighter*, and *The Wide, Wide World* were the huge bestsellers—he turned to poetry. Even so, *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the Civil War* (1866), *Clarel* (1876), *John Marr & Other Sailors* (1888), and *Timoleon* (1891) also went unread. The Brahman literati—Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes—along with Englishmen like Browning and Lord Tennyson, then dominated the poetic landscape, and Melville was not in their league. As far as I can see, Melville's poems did nothing for his reputation as a writer in his lifetime and have had no significant influence on the development of American poetry since. Some critics have overpraised them, of course, since they are Melville's, but they are only somewhat more interesting than the poetical strenuosities of Thoreau. The one significant work of Melville's later years was that never-finished (but posthumously published) tale of innocence and guilt, murder and execution, *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924), a flawed masterpiece over which critics have quarreled for nearly a century.

The publishing history of Melville's work has quite naturally interested readers most in the early years of his life. And biographers have rightly put the initial stress, at least, on Melville's descent. Although we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

think of him as a rough sailor drawn to the primitive life, he came from a family of patrician social standing in New York City and, though poor, was everywhere accepted as a gentleman. Descended on his father's side from a line of Scottish lairds, he could count on his mother's side a wealthy family of Dutch merchants, the Gansevoorts of Albany. One of Herman's ancestors, Major Thomas Melvill (Herman's mother added the final *e* so as to reestablish a link with the Scottish aristocrats), was a principal actor in the Boston Tea Party. This Melvill was a renowned American patriot eulogized by Daniel Webster, and affectionately memorialized by Oliver Wendell Holmes (in "The Last Leaf") as that old-fashioned relic in the quaint three-cornered hat and knee-stockings, the still living embodiment of the Revolution. Another notable ancestor was Colonel Peter Gansevoort, the hero of Fort Schuyler in the Revolutionary War and a commissioner to the Iroquois.

Although they lived in high style in New York City, the family of Allan Melvill, the novelist's father, was never financially secure. Afflicted by bad judgment in the import business, he bought high, sold low, and took out ever larger loans to cover unpayable debts. When he died in 1832 (Herman was twelve), the eight children and their mother were plunged into a poverty from which they never recovered. Dependent on the charity of relatives in Albany and New York, Maria Melville put the teenage boy to a variety of odd jobs (bank clerking, teaching, farming). Liking the outdoor life, as some of his older relatives did, he finally settled on the commercial fisheries, and, at twenty, went off to sea.

Shipping aboard the *Acushnet* from New Bedford on her maiden voyage in 1839, Melville learned enough of the whaling business in the South Pacific to write *Moby-Dick*. But he didn't like life under the command of Captain Valentine Pease, whom he described as a harsh master, and he jumped ship in the Marquesas Islands, where he lived for a few weeks with Polynesian natives. There he absorbed some of the material for *Typee* and *Omoo*, as well as suggestions for an abstruse allegorical novel published in 1849 called *Mardi*.

After some drifting about and a variety of odd jobs, Melville then joined the U.S. Navy, sailed for Europe, and eventually returned to the United States in 1845 with enough material for *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849), a comic apprenticeship novel; and *White-Jacket* (1850), a novel of about the miseries of the common seamen in the U.S. Navy. Shortly after his return to America, and thanks to the financial success of his Polynesian tales, Melville courted and married Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of Lemuel Shaw, the well-to-do conservative chief justice of Massachusetts, as well as a family friend. At the time Melville was so confident of a lucrative literary career that he bought a large farm near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he intended to settle and write. But, as his subsequent work failed to make any money, he was obliged to return to New York and—like Chaucer, Burns, and Hawthorne before him—earn his keep in the customhouse. It used to be the common view that Melville's "sequestration" from the world of letters was accompanied by bitterness, poverty, and marital discord.

Because of the relative paucity of facts about the author after 1860, much of the last thirty years of Melville's life have been marked by curiosity and critical controversy. But the discovery in 1983 in an upstate New York barn of two old trunks and a wooden chest filled with Melville manuscripts and family documents (the property of Melville's sister Augusta, who had lived with Melville and his wife), as well as other recently discovered stray letters and like memorabilia, has thrown a fresh light on the author's life and works. Among the materials contained in these trunks were two manuscript chapters of *Typee*, a different manuscript conclusion for "Bartleby the Scrivener" (he does not die in the fetal position), and some three hundred and eighty family letters, nearly half of which mention Herman or his works. Clearly such

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a treasure of original documents called for a fresh look at the writer and his work, and the first important biographical studies to take account of the new material have just appeared: Laurie Robertson-Lorant's *Melville: A Biography*;[1] and Hershel Parker's *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 1*: 1819–1851,[2] the first of a projected two-volume life. Parker, who edited *Pierre: Or, The Ambiguities*,[3] for the standard Melville edition, has also produced a new edition of the novel with illustrations by Maurice Sendak.

The two biographies have much in common. Each of the authors is a Melville expert. Each book is the work of many years of devotion; each is grounded on a solid research base; and each is lucid in style. They are, nevertheless, quite different books. Ms. Robertson-Lorant, who took her doctorate from New York University and acknowledges the inspiration of the eminent Americanists Gay Wilson Allen and William Gibson, is a teacher at St. Mark's School in Southborough, Massachusetts. Parker is the H. Fletcher Brown Professor of English at the University of Delaware and a longtime editor of and adviser to the "definitive" Melville edition published by Northwestern University and the Newberry Library. If Ms. Robertson-Lorant is a poet and a reformer, Parker is a down-to-earth archivist tenacious about turning up every fact, no matter how seemingly minor or remotely contextual, and making it available. Parker gives us detailed ship rosters, cargo manifests, ports of call, real estate transactions, correspondence lists, genealogical data, etc.

Of these two, the Robertson-Lorant life was first to appear, though by only a few months. This gave Parker the opportunity—in a Preface that usefully reviews previous biographical treatments of Melville—to comment on her work:

> Casting a wider net than [Edwin Haviland] Miller, Robertson-Lorant made good use of recent publications, including the Historical Notes and other editorial information in volumes of *The Writings of Herman Melville*. She made vigorous forays into much the same archival material I have used, but she was sporadic rather than exhaustive in her study of the family letters, and not always alert to the narrative potential of other kinds of evidence, such as records of Melville's reading and his marginalia.

I think the comment largely just. Her sweep *is* broader than that of Miller. (The author of the rigorously psychoanalytic *Melville* [1975], Miller might very well have been another of her teachers at NYU, although she scants his work for reasons worth a later comment.) And she *has* exploited what the Northwestern-Newberry Library editors have turned up in preparing their editions of individual works. But a more generous critic than Parker might not have suggested that Dr. Robertson-Lorant was exploiting his own editorial work—even though she had every right to do so, if properly acknowledged, and indeed should have done so, as a matter of exacting scholarly procedure. I also think that a more generous critic might have called her "selective" rather than "sporadic" in her use of old and newly available facts—especially since her more than seven hundred pages can hardly be accounted a *vita brevis*. Parker evidently does not intend to be sporadic: if volume two is as long as the first, his life of Melville will weigh in at over 1,700 pages and easily claim the Leviathan prize.

Nevertheless, Dr. Robertson-Lorant could, if she wished, properly fault Hershel Parker for bringing out this new edition of *Pierre*—a subject that deserves a brief digression. Parker edited the "definitive" edition of

1 *Melville: A Biography*, by Laurie Robertson-Lorant; Clarkson Potter, 710 pages, $40.

2 *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 1*: 1819–1851, by Hershel Parker; Johns Hopkins University Press, 883 pages, $39.95.

3 *Pierre: Or, The Ambiguities*, by Herman Melville, edited by Hershel Parker and illustrated by Maurice Sendak; HarperCollins, 449 pages, $30.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pierre (1852) for *The Writings of Herman Melville* in 1971. The novel was, in its first manuscript form, a rather compact, if not exactly upbeat, exploration of various characters' psychological states, chiefly that of the title character. Parker debatably calls it "surely the finest psychological novel anyone had yet written in English." Melville offered the manuscript to Harper's before it was quite finished and was so outraged at the dismissive terms they offered that he inserted several chapters making Pierre a writer and satirizing, in a rather savage and digressive way, the literary life in America. Parker believes that the elimination of these chapters will restore *Pierre* to the form it was originally intended to have. Consequently, he has eliminated all references to Pierre as an author and has deleted books 17, 18, and 22, and made other excisions in 19, 21, 23, 25, and 26.

I believe that producing this edition was a gross mistake and that readers should carefully razor out the splendid Sendak illustrations and go back to the complete text of the Northwestern-Newberry Library edition that represents Melville's real, impassioned, and final intention. Any such maneuver as Parker's, no matter how well-meaning as an effort to "save" the novelist from his own satirical intent, can only be called editorial *chutzpah*.

A better biographer than editor, at least in this instance, Parker conceives of biography as an opportunity to present us with a writer whom we thought we knew but who is both stranger and greater than we had supposed. Once he gets Herman born, the Parker life is a straightforward, rigorously linear historical account. Chapters are titled with clear chronological markers—evidence of Parker's extensive work in updating Jay Leyda's groundbreaking *The Melville Log* (1951). The typical Parker page is a meticulous web of detail and is studded with fact and quotation. Yet the page is clean: superscripts are absent and citations are unobtrusively handled in endnotes. Parker seems content to present the facts and let them, as it were, speak for themselves. He is evidently innocent of a "theory of biography," and the events of Melville's life are not fitted to any Procrustean thesis about "childhood development" or "the nature of personality." This is all the more remarkable to me, and commendable, since Melville and his work have regularly been stove-in by a battering ram of Freudians, Jungians, Ericksonians, Lacanians, etc., looking for (and finding!) Oedipus complexes, world-class archetypes, signs of family incest, tropes of the omphalos, regressions to savagery, intimations of homosexuality, hints of heterosexuality, and, of all things, *symbolic* cannibalism. Parker's first volume, in any case, takes us up to the publication of *Moby-Dick*, Melville's unqualified masterpiece.

Parker's work is meant for the scholar, the graduate student, and the research library. Its refusal to fit the facts of Melville's life to any of the academy's current theoretical obsessions means that it is likely to be the definitive source of information for some time. Even so, it can be a vexing book. Some of Melville's experiences were true adventures, yet Parker eschews any rhetorical heightening in favor of steady matter-of-factness. Moreover, a great many of Melville's experiences cry out for sophisticated interpretation, yet Parker does not dive deep. His work is not an inside narrative.

I must add to this some vexation at Parker's deliberate refusal to engage with previous biographers. In the Preface, he remarks:

> The book tells, page by page, chapter by chapter, a new story about a writer we thought we had known. The abundance of new documentation affords me the extraordinary—almost unique—luxury of telling my new story without reference to other biographers, after these prefatory pages. The alternative would have been to choke the pages with modifications, corrections, and rebuttals, some significant, some quite trivial. A time or two I mention [the biographer Leon] Howard's opinion on some doubtful point, as if I were continuing a discussion with the living

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> man, but I never correct any biographer in the body of this book, and I have resisted coming down emphatically when I am quoting a document that someone else had mistranscribed or misdated. The reader who sees that my transcriptions, datings, and judgments differ from those in other biographies or criticism will have to conclude that, right or wrong, I thought I knew what I was doing.

Such an attitude, in my view, is really an impediment to Melville studies and an obstacle to learning itself, which is cumulative and aggregative and which proceeds, among other ways, by the careful documentation and elimination of error. Parker's method presupposes that his life is the really accurate one, that only his need be consulted, that it displaces all previous work, and in all this we have to take him at his word. Such a viewpoint discourages collation of information, the comparison of various biographical accounts, and the verification of fact. I have the greatest respect for Parker's work on Melville. And I am convinced that he knows more about Melville's life and books than anyone else in the world. This will be the standard biography for years to come. But he has tried to close the door to comparative analysis and it won't do.

Dr. Robertson-Lorant, by contrast, welcomes comparison and brings her disagreement with other biographers and critics to the fore. Her text and endnotes are replete with arguments adduced and defended. If she is more selective with the mass of Melville materials, she is more generous than Parker in elaborating a "historical context" for Melville's work. Sometimes the context is impressive—like her extensive account of how whales were chased, harpooned, flensed, and rendered into sperm oil by the satanic fires of the try-pots.

But often the historical context is a concoction of inundating detail that is marginal to Melville's life. Long paragraphs or even pages are given to discussions of extra-literary events. We learn more than we need to know about how sex was repressed in Melville's day (though he and Lizzie managed to produce four children, and six or eight were not uncommon at the time). We also hear about how blacks were enslaved and American Indians were discriminated against. The domestic situation of women and the laws that governed property loom large in the Robertson-Lorant account. In case anybody is interested (and we aren't), she repeatedly flourishes her radical *bona fides* by constantly faulting the market economy, and we hear a great deal about the despoliation of nature by westering America. She is so hopelessly PC that she makes me want to go out and get the bumper sticker "NUKE THE WHALES."

Robertson-Lorant's life is an instance of the abysmal New Historicism, which authorizes anyone to jerry-rig her own political prejudices into a so-called context for a historical biography. She is thin, thin, thin on Melville's political views and so comes very close to seriously misrepresenting his fundamental social conservatism. About the family's Calvinism or the Dutch Reformed Church and the doctrines that formed the family in Melville's youth she has little to say, and the fact that Melville raged against God and Christianity yet often went to services with his family and even joined All Souls' Unitarian Church does not get the attention that it deserves.

In short, for Robertson-Lorant a biography is an occasion for didactic homily, and she never misses a chance to demonstrate her superior morality, often in the most risible ways. An instance: "Having recently learned that ACLS supported teachers and artists who were blacklisted during the McCarthy reign of terror in the 1950s, I was doubly proud to have been a recipient of an ACLS fellowship." Imagine being proud of a link with Communist teachers and artists who wanted nothing less than the overthrow of our constitutional liberties and the violent wreckage of our elective government! Poor woman, she hasn't the faintest clue about what a "reign of terror" is. But she might very well ask

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

older Russians, Hungarians, Czechs, and Cubans if she really wants to know. Evidently Dr. Robertson-Lorant is one of those parlor Marxists in the educational world for whom "the new market capitalism and industrialization" can be blamed for Melville's and even America's ills. Adolescents should be protected from her.

Although she was taught to plumb the archives and secure the facts (and has in reality made good use of many of them), Dr. Robertson-Lorant calls herself emotional and intuitive, and she sees Melville's character as an enigma to be solved only by feminine understanding. This leads her to interrogate more fully than anyone else has done Melville's relationship with the women in his life. And in this lies the real strength of her work. If Parker and other male biographers care little for Melville's domestic sphere, wrongly preferring to focus on Melville's life aboard the all-male sailing ships, his relationship with Nathaniel Hawthorne, or his involvement with Evert Duyckinck and the New York literary scene, she makes a persuasive claim for the importance of mother Maria Melville, wife Lizzie, sister Augusta, and sister-in-law Sophia Melville (all of whom lived with him), not to speak of his two daughters, Frances and Elizabeth.

Far from sporadic, Dr. Robertson-Lorant's use of family letters shows that, while Melville could disappear into his room for days at a time when the writing fit was on him, he was by no means an isolato or a hermit. He was in fact a sociable man who needed and wanted the company of women, on whom he depended for various kinds of financial, emotional, and professional support. There was for many years a family rumor that Melville's marriage was a tempestuous one, and some recent feminists have even wrongly claimed that Melville was a wife beater. The newly discovered letters clear up the mystery.

Melville was a moody man given to depressions of the kind that evidently disabled his father, who had died bankrupt, raving in an insane state. A strain of madness, or at least depression, sometimes suicidal, evidently ran in the family and doubtless accounts for the suicide of Herman's older son Malcolm in 1867. His in-laws were concerned about this family trait. Melville alludes to his recurrent bouts with melancholia in *Moby-Dick*, where in the opening paragraph Ishmael speaks of taking to the sea whenever he has an attack of the spleen,

> whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off.

In 1867 Melville evidently had something like a nervous breakdown and must have become depressed, irritable, and impossible to live with. He had produced a great many novels and stories that, however important, had left him deeper in debt and his family even more impoverished. The Lemuel Shaws had supported Herman and his wife in various generous ways, but really it was his responsibility to put food on the table, and he had not done so. No doubt he brooded to excess. It is also possible that the breakdown was precipitated by or concurrent with too much alcohol.

In any case, what has recently come to light is that some of Elizabeth Melville's relatives, especially Sam Shaw, feared for her well being and proposed her separating from Melville to save her from the danger of cohabiting with an "insane" husband. They even consulted with the Melvilles' minister, Henry Bellows of All Souls', who recommended the Shaws' kidnapping her and the children and spiriting them off to Boston. Neither solution was a sound one, not so much, in my view, because such actions would have led to a forfeiture of her claims to property and the children as be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cause Elizabeth would not hear of it. She remained with Herman, they weathered his illness and stayed together. Melville's affection for Lizzie was a constant to the very end, and to her and their marriage he was evidently perfectly faithful. Indeed, as Jay Leyda remarked in 1983, when the "Augusta letters" were first discovered, despite the breakdown, all in all "there is a completely new picture of his relations with his wife, showing their life together to be fairly normal." The essential stability of Melville's married life is commendably acknowledged in Dr. Robertson-Lorant's judicious treatment of this episode.

One final word about Dr. Robertson-Lorant's claim that she has brought intuition and empathy to bear on the interpretation of Melville's life. The word has to do with what she "knows" about Melville's sexuality. Sexuality is a hot topic now in the academy and at the literary conferences. The all-consuming question seems to be whether any given male writer can or cannot be "outed" as gay, whether he is demonstrably bisexual, whether he ever committed incest with his mother, sister, or daughter, and whether he was a misogynist, wife beater, or emotional sadist.

Now, a number of Melville's narratives sail perilously close to the shore of obscenity in dealing with sexual matters. He had a bad boy's irresistible impulse to create comedy out of unmentionable subjects and to engage in innuendoes about things taboo to the reading public. One instance is the coy description of the sailors' riotous orgies with the lascivious island beauties in *Typee*. Another is the hint of sodomy among sailors at sea in *White-Jacket*. A third is Melville's preoccupation with sex in *Moby-Dick*, where he comically devotes a whole chapter to the six-foot penis of the sperm whale (risking blasphemy in calling the stripped outer skin "The Cassock," a religious garment). In addition, there are intimations of incest in *Pierre*. Some have wondered aloud if Herman was making it with his sister Augusta, though there is no evidence for the preposterous suggestion. Several homosexual literary critics have likewise boldly announced that Melville was gay, that he had recourse to sodomy as a sailor, and that episodes like the sperm-squeezing scene in *Moby-Dick* prove that he and other seamen indulged in mutual masturbation.

Other evidence adduced as "proof" that Melville was gay, or at least bisexual, is Melville's friendship with Hawthorne while they lived at Pittsfield. Edwin Miller, in *Melville*, argued that the friendship was based on homosexual attraction and even suggested that Hawthorne left the Berkshires because Melville had made a homosexual advance to him. Dr. Robertson-Lorant knows that there is no scholarly evidence, no documentable record, for such claims. And she is critical of those who assert things about Melville's sexuality without adducing any evidence. Yet here she is on whether Melville had ever engaged in homosexual activity:

> Given the inner conflicts Melville had inherited from his parents and the repressions Victorian culture imposed on sexuality, a former sailor who had undoubtedly experienced some form of homosexual activity at sea, and had languished on tropic islands with bare-breasted men and maidens, was bound to have trouble adjusting to a conventional marriage. If genteel Victorians experienced sexual pleasure, they kept it a secret or couched it in religious rhetoric, because official ideology branded carnal pleasures as evidence of natural depravity. Writing was a safe form of sexual sublimation, a kind of metaphysical onanism by which Melville had the pleasure of losing himself in the "supersensuousness" of artistic discovery and creation.

I pass over the crude description of writing as a form of mental masturbation, a laughable notion according to which Melville supposedly sublimated forbidden pleasures. But I can't help pointing out that if Melville in fact sublimated desire though writing, where is the evidence that he actually acted out homosexual desire? Yet Robertson-Lo-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rant says that he "undoubtedly" experienced some form of homosexual activity. As to this claim, there is zero evidence and every reason to doubt it.

The fact is that Dr. Robertson-Lorant doubts it herself and is actually irresolute on the question and feels obliged to attach an appendix to her biography called "Afterword: Melville's Sexuality." There reason, partly at least, replaces intuition, empathy disappears, and the demand for evidence dislodges vain biographical speculation. In the appendix she expresses great vexation at the critics who continually natter on about Melville's sexuality instead of attending to his art. Like the true scholar she was trained to be, she objects to those who have warped Melville's friendship with Hawthorne into a homosexual bond, pointing out that the documented biographical facts present a man in love with his wife, fully heterosexual, the father of four children, and nothing at all, in his psychic life, like Whitman, Oscar Wilde, or other gays who have openly proclaimed a love of manly comrades.

Even though she has already argued it herself, she is openly critical in the appendix of scholars who "argue that Melville must have had sexual contact with his shipmates *because all sailors did*, and as proof they cite the sperm-squeezing scene in *Moby-Dick*." Since there is no documentable evidence for these claims about Melville's sexuality, she finally comes down, in the end, on the side of right reason in remarking that "focusing on Melville's sexual orientation deflects attention from the literary qualities of his extraordinary novels, stories, and poems." It takes her six-hundred and nineteen pages to come to this determination. It ought to have been the premise of her lively and engagingly written study, which will doubtless capture more of the popular audience, despite its Marxist twaddle, than Hershel Parker's sprawling and more comprehensive work.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Max Beckmann at the Guggenheim

by Karen Wilkin

My teenage years can be evoked, as I think they can for a few of my former classmates at the High School of Music and Art, not by pop music, but by the street-smart dissonances and raunchy lyrics of *The Three-Penny Opera*. My closest friends and I went more than once to see the Brecht-Weill classic performed in the Village. We listened over and over to the record, held by its cynical, edgy daring and its erotic overtones—rap for would-be bohemians in the late 1950s—noting, however, that the record lyrics were less explicit than the theater version. Our parents thought it a little "adult" for fifteen-year-olds, but as old leftists, they generally approved of both the composer and the author. And since Lotte Lenya was in the cast, we were witnessing living theater history, which was educational. Later, when an amazing film of the original Berlin production with the young Lenya turned up, we rushed to see it and thrilled at its rawness, rudeness, and vitality.

As children of the 1940s, we hadn't been encouraged to be Germanophiles, but Thomas Mann fascinated us (except for my best friend's unidentical twin sister who preferred *Gone with the Wind*), and the self-conscious naughtiness of German Expressionist painting, with its frank hostility to the status quo, appealed to us as intellectually pretentious, mildly rebellious New York teenagers; that scratchy, ecstatic Kokoschka double portrait of the art historian and his wife at MOMA was a heavy favorite. But the most compelling German painting at MOMA was a strange triptych, mysterious not only because of its disturbing subject matter, but because—unlike the Kokoschka—it didn't correspond to anything we were learning about twentieth-century German art in our introductory art history class. The meaning of the picture seemed always just out of reach, but somehow, it seemed to have to do with what we liked about *The Three-Penny Opera*. The painting was, of course, Max Beckmann's magnificent *Departure* (1932–33).

In the intervening decades, I've lost my taste for most of the German Expressionists and learned a lot more about the period—including that Beckmann disliked much of what they were about—but *Departure*'s horrific side panels of theatrical torture and oddly comforting center panel of mythological figures in a boat have lost none of their power to make me stop and ponder.

They stopped me in the downtown Guggenheim's superlative exhibition, "Max Beckmann in Exile,"[1] where *Departure* more than holds its own amid a fine selection of

1 "Max Beckmann in Exile" opened at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, on October 9, 1996, and remains on view through January 5, 1997. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Beckmann, Matthew Drutt, Barbara Stehlé-Akhtar, Reinhard Spieler, Stephen Lackner, and Eric Fischl, has been published by the Guggenheim Museum (143 pages, $50; $24.95).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

some of this rarely celebrated modern master's most powerful works. This wonderful show is long overdue; although there have been small shows at infrequent intervals, Beckmann's last major American museum exhibition was a retrospective organized in 1964 by MOMA, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Art Institute of Chicago. The "exile" of the Guggenheim show's title is both literal and metaphorical. *Departure*, the earliest work included, was finished in 1933, when the Nazis assumed power and Beckmann, at forty-nine hailed as one the most important modern German artists, was dismissed from his teaching position in Frankfurt and forbidden to exhibit. He moved to Berlin, hoping that things would improve, but four years later, his work pilloried in the Nazi "Degenerate Art" exhibition, Beckmann and his young second wife left to spend the next decade in Amsterdam. In 1947, they left Europe definitively, to settle in the U.S. Beckmann died suddenly in New York, two months short of his sixty-eighth birthday, at the end of 1951, without ever revisiting his homeland.

The exhibition makes clear that despite the turmoil and deprivations of the war years, despite the psychological disruption of moving from the Old World to the New, Beckmann showed no slackening of productivity or invention during this period; quite the opposite, it generated some of his most ambitious and achieved work. The curator of the show, Matthew Drutt, wisely concentrated on Beckmann's "public" works —his monumental triptychs and large scale paintings—punctuating them with a few self-portraits (including one of the artist and his wife) and smaller works chosen because of their iconographic or emotional connections. As is always the case, alas, with even the best organized exhibitions, there are regrettable absences; two of Beckmann's nine completed triptychs were unavailable and a few private collectors proved unwilling to part with their pictures. Still, having seven of the thundering triptychs in one place, from the earliest, *Departure*, to the last, the strangely calm *Argonauts* (1949–50, National Gallery, Washington), is exciting and illuminating. The cumulative effect is almost overpowering: for the intensity of feeling in Beckmann's images, for their power to disturb, and for the sense of disequilibrium they provoke. It is no less dazzling for the ferocity of his color, the gorgeousness of his touch, the sensuality of his paint handling, or the assuredness of his drawing.

Beckmann's paintings are so rich, so loaded, that it is difficult to know how to begin to talk about them. They seem to operate at several speeds at once. The initial impact of their often startling subject matter is instantaneous, as is the effect of their saturated, glowing color and bottomless, velvety blacks. We are immediately struck, too, by the way Beckmann's sturdily modeled, firmly drawn figures are crammed into their spaces, straining the edges, shoving toward us as though about to burst the sacrosanct surface of the canvas. But even these observable facts, in Beckmann's hands, raise thought-provoking questions that slow us down and make us consider alternatives. Is this heated color, this aggressive pictorial structure the result of sheer force of feeling? Are they responses to chromatic and spatial possibilities suggested by Fauvism and Cubism—with which Beckmann was thoroughly familiar—or are they deliberate violations of "rules"? Are these visual equivalents of the way Brecht's characters address the audience directly, shattering theatrical illusions and calling attention to the artifice of performance?

Beckmann's unstable narratives and thrusting, confrontational compositions call up a staggering range of associations, at once precise and elusive, that can be unraveled only slowly—and then incompletely. The triptychs, for example, obviously take their format from traditional devotional images. The side panels of *Blind Man's Buff* (1944–45, Minneapolis Institute of Arts) adhere closely to the conventions of how Renaissance donors were depicted: a kneeling woman on one side, with her blindfolded male counterpart on the other, each

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

backed by a tightly packed phalanx of figures, like patron saints in an altarpiece. The central panel, however, is not the expected nativity or crucifixion, but a weird concert in which a splay-legged "savage" drummer seems to challenge a female harpist. They, in turn, are bracketed by a pair of reclining pipe players, male and female, like classical river gods gone awry; a suspicious woman in evening dress watches, groped by a man wearing a dinner jacket and an enormous ass's head. This unlikely assortment is knotted and twined together in a tipped architectural setting, apparently full of closed doors—a hotel room?—the whole brilliantly, pitilessly lit, like an operating room. Snatches of modern, even bourgeois, domesticity assert themselves in the alarm clock, the rug, and the spiky snake plant. The "donor panels" are similarly dislocated and dislocating. The kneeling figures, with their candles and ceremonial poses are suggestive of ritual, but the "patron saint" attendants, crushed into the background, seem to be performers, whores, musicians, partygoers, and—Beckmann's ubiquitous modern-day messenger of the gods—a diminutive bellboy. The disparate sizes of the figures push the viewer further off balance and, at the same time, sound an echo of another medieval convention, that of rendering the most important characters larger than the supporting cast.

Who are these people? What is going on? The contrast of the (almost overly literal) "primitive" drummer and the "refined" harpist (who, however, displays an indecorous amount of leg) suggests rather obvious interpretations, which puts the picture at risk. Beckmann suffers, to my eye, when his "message" is too easily read; ambiguity helps. Here, the unexpectedness of the picture as a whole and its enthralling details redeem the problematically opposed central pair. But the more we study the painting, the more it resists us, paradoxically, by triggering more and more associations at the same time that it refuses to yield a clear meaning. It's like working away at a tangled skein of yarn, teasing loose more and more promising-looking strands, but never managing to unravel the knot.

Beckmann's enigmatic allegories are enacted by a troupe of characters that gradually becomes familiar: acrobats, warriors, whores, a Fisher King, circus performers, bellboys, men in dinner jackets, women in evening clothes, even the occasional innocent—some clearly modern, others in fantastic or period dress. We recognize persistent horrors: outsized grotesque masks, monstrous birds, bound figures about to be tortured or already mutilated, giant fish that can also seem unexpectedly benign. Scale shifts. The gargantuan fruit in the left panel of *Departure*, for example, works like a zoom lens, increasing the fictive distance between the viewer and the disproportionately small figures frozen in a scene of carnage. The perfectly regular giant apple and elegantly modeled pear become monuments to aesthetic normality, to "pure" formal concerns, in the midst of the chaos of trussed, imprisoned, and maimed bodies.

Meaning is as unstable as scale and viewpoint. Beckmann seems to comment on the actual, by incorporating contemporary clothing, newspapers with recognizable, familiar names, and assorted "signs" of modern life, but at the same time, he presents them in plainly fictive groupings, like tableaux snatched from a performance whose narrative logic escapes us. We begin to question the most obvious of references. Are the heroes and soldiers what they seem to be or are they performers, dressed for a role? Are the men in black tie themselves performers or witnesses to the spectacle? Are they comfortable bourgeois correctly dressed for evening or are they musicians or headwaiters? When Beckmann paints himself he is no more straightforward than in his most subtle allegories. The exhibition's marvelous *Self-Portrait with Horn* (1938, Dr. and Mrs. Stephan Lackner), with its lurid red-oranges and salmon pinks, is at first glance an apparently uncomplicated image of the painter in costume, holding a band instrument. The paint handling, like the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

color, is characteristically lush and the way the round-headed figure spreads across the square canvas, particularly harmonious. But the longer we look, the more off-kilter the picture becomes. The subject's sidelong glance sends us spiraling along the horn until we are stopped by the flat black oval of the bell, which is sliced by a roughly brushed band—the edge of a mirror? We become aware of the rectangular frame behind Beckmann's head in his painted reflection and the space of the painting suddenly collapses; only the coil of the horn, like a spring, keeps the brilliant red plane along the right edge from sliding back and obliterating the figure. The self-portrait is no less disturbing than the most brutal of the triptychs.

Beckmann's images function both as icons of a "new mythology" that he said he strove to create for his own times, and as records of that mythology's rituals—or more accurately, its performances. His figures inhabit an airless, artificially lit world of schematic interiors, a claustrophobic architecture that is at once stage set, orchestra pit, and improvised backstage space, bathed in brilliant light both theatrical and clinical, giving vivid life to the phrase "operating theater." The spaces seem ramshackle, crowded, improvised, as though the traditions of the opera house, the cabaret, the commedia dell'arte, and the sideshow had been forced unwillingly into coexistence or as though the operating theater were in a temporary field hospital. (This is not farfetched; Beckmann served in the German medical corps during World War I, witnessing harrowing scenes that he described in a series of published letters and mined for decades afterward in his art.) The suggestion of sky or open air is rare, surprising, and exhilarating; the expanse of radiant blue in the central panel of *Departure*, for example, creates an extraordinary sense of peace and hopefulness, an almost physical relief after the closed, squeezed space of the side panels.

Often, the spaces in Beckmann's pictures seem barely large enough to contain the figures who inhabit them. There's usually considerable tension between the forward-pressing, tilted spaces of Beckmann's crowded interiors and the barely glimpsed lower levels of his jerry-built theaters (the mood darkens as you descend), just as there is often a contrast of space and emotional temperature between the center and side panels of the triptychs, with a distinct suggestion that something sinister is happening behind the scenes. "Center stage" limbs and bodies angle against one another, so that it is sometimes difficult to be sure what belongs to whom. Below, musicians seem to burst out of the pit. Men fight with knives beneath a stage where a Player King stabs himself; is it a real struggle or a rehearsal? I kept thinking of itinerant players and medieval mystery plays enacted on carts in front of the cathedrals. But that bellboy keeps bringing us back to the twentieth-century, reminding us of another metaphor, beloved of 1930s moviemakers, of the hotel lobby as microcosm. The angular, prismatic structure of the picture as a whole tugs us in two directions at once, reminding us of Cubist prototypes at the same time that it returns us to the past, to El Greco, whom Beckmann admired and learned much from—and who, of course, offered the young Picasso a model for the faceting of early Cubist space.

Beckmann's titles—*Acrobats*, *Actors*, *Carnival*, etc.—reinforce the theater and circus associations, as do the curious costumes in many of his portraits and self-portraits. His writings, too, make the connections explicit. In a 1927 essay on "the social stance of the artist," he ironically referred to himself as "the black tightrope walker," an image taken from a celebrated passage in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in which actors, tightrope walkers, and "supermen" are praised as risk takers who separate themselves from the common herd. Beckmann was engaged with the book throughout his life, beginning with early diary entries that dispute many of Nietzsche's premises, and echos of it resound in Beckmann's images.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The exhibition's strange *Falling Man* (1950, National Gallery, Washington), for example, with its burning buildings and "bird-boats," can be read as alluding to a fallen tightrope walker in Nietzsche, while the heroic "Aryan" nudes on the beach in the central panel of *Argonauts* seem to have as much to do with the *Übermensch* as with such obvious art-historical cognates as Picasso and classical antiquity.

What is less known is that Beckmann, like many of his artist colleagues, particularly Kokoschka, experimented with the theater himself. In the 1920s, he wrote a number of plays—three survive—heavily influenced by Wedekind, which read like descriptions of some of his most explicit images. One describes a plump bourgeois's abortive career as a bohemian free spirit among prostitutes, artists, and criminals—unlike a Nietzschean hero, however, Beckmann's protagonist goes passively back to cozy domesticity. Another, titled *The Hotel*, which incorporates varied dialects, popular songs, "fantasy and ranting," has been described by the editor and translator of a forthcoming collection of Beckmann's writings as "earthy, vulgar, and grotesque"—adjectives that would have delighted Brecht.[2]

Beckmann's complex inventions, his elegant conflations of the art historical and the vernacular can be exhaustively "unpacked" for seemingly endless references and meanings—sociological and political, as well as metaphysical and aesthetic. But what gives his best paintings their unforgettable potency is their staggering material presence. That *Afternoon* (1946, Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund), for example, is like a nightmare version of Titian's *Danaë* is only part of what makes this smallish single-panel picture so arresting; the reclining figure, her girlish face and hair at odds with her prostitute's "uniform" of chemise and rolled black stockings, recoils from the threatening spiky hands of a red-brown simian figure in a vaguely Egyptian headdress. No doubt there's a good deal to say about the role of women in German society, the hypocrisy of the middle classes, and more, in relation to the picture. But the urgency of the young woman's withdrawal is signaled by the contrast of her massive legs and hands and her small head, and the real drama of the painting comes from the way those legs and hands are modeled with violent contrasts of brushy pigment, and the way both figures are shoved toward the surface by the flat, densely brushed blue-grey plane of the background.

Beckmann's heated, dissonant color, his seductively layered, masterly paint handling, and his forthright, nuanced modeling are as crucial to the impact of his pictures as their "encrypted" messages or their seamless fusion of current references and time-honored structures. Part of it is simply a combination of sensitivity to the medium of oil paint and good old-fashioned craftsmanship. Marsden Hartley and Adolph Gottlieb shared this ability to make the amount of paint deposited with each touch seem expressive, intuitive, and important, and I suspect Hartley, who certainly saw Beckmann's early work in Germany, and Gottlieb, who had ample opportunity to see it during his early extended travels in Europe, of having more than a passing interest in his paintings. (I suspect Günther Grass of having studied Beckmann, too—think about *The Tin Drum* and *The Flounder*, for starters.)

The emotional force of Beckmann's art is intimately bound up with its facture. He seems to have usually worked on a dark—even black—ground, dragging brights and lights to the surface, modulating volumes by revealing the underlying layer of darks at the edges, and then nailing them with his fluent, authoratitive black line. But there are also numerous passages of opaque, matte black—assertive expanses of dinner jacket, networks of imprisoning bars, or form-molding shadows—that are imposed on the surface of the pictures, rather than surging

2 *Self-Portrait in Words: Collected Writings and Statements, 1903–1950*, by Max Beckmann, edited and translated by Barbara Copeland Buenger; University of Chicago Press, 406 pages, $34.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from underneath, so that black seems to eat chromatic color, rather than set it off. Subtle as it is, almost to the point of being imperceptible, unless you look hard, this reversal helps to further destabilize Beckmann's unquiet spaces; it makes his tightly packed figures even more uncomfortable, his assonant color chords more disturbing. It's something like the way the dense harmonies work in the most ambitious compositions of Beckmann's near-contemporary, Stefan Wolpe; individual melodic lines are lost to the ear in the layered complexities of the whole, but they remain visible on the written page and arguably make their presence felt, perhaps subliminally, when we hear the music performed, affecting our response.

"Max Beckman in Exile" is not to be missed. The wall text panels are, however, problematic; *Beginning* (1946–49, Metropolitan Museum), Beckmann's abrasive triptych of a boyhood nursery and schoolroom just this side of Grass's *Tin Drum*, is said to "dwell upon memories of childhood innocence," but such commentary, like the inexplicable yellow walls of the exhibition galleries, can be ignored. The catalogue can be recommended, with reservations. First, the plusses: surprisingly good color reproductions of everything in the show and a few things that didn't make it, including Beckmann's last, unfinished triptych; a thoughtful, felt essay by Eric Fischl about his "discovery" of *Departure* and the impact it had on his work; an intimate memoir by Beckmann's close friend Stephan Lackner; and reprints of two hard-to-find texts by Beckmann. But there is less useful back matter than we might expect and, more problematic, a couple of essays by German scholars, full of useful facts, but poor reading, not only because the translations preserve too faithfully the cadences of German academic prose, but because they are both rather supercilious and condescending.

The more interesting—and less aggrieved—essay, by Reinhard Spieler, identifies Beckmann's "characters" and itemizes many of the complex, varied sources of the imagery of his triptychs. That these range from classical antiquity to Italian Renaissance frescoes to modern French painting, not to mention a host of German literary, mythological, and artistic antecedents, is not surprising, given the cultivated, well-traveled Beckmann's broad first-hand experience of art. As a young painter he spent considerable time in Italy, and as a mature artist, he had maintained an apartment in Paris until the unrest of pre-World War II Europe made it impossible. Spieler is eager for Beckmann to take his place not as a "Germanic" artist, but as a universal one, a difficult distinction, no matter how much of an individual Beckmann was, or how different his art was from that of his compatriots. Far more adventurous and inventive than the inherently conservative painters of the "New Objectivity," Beckmann nevertheless had a more sympathetic relationship with the past than the German Expressionists with whom he is often, misleadingly, grouped. While Beckmann certainly didn't strive to imitate the dispassionate magic realism of traditional Northern painting, neither did he reject traditional art out of hand. When he embraced modernist forms and strategies, as he did wholeheartedly, it was not—as for many of his colleagues—in a spirit of self-conscious primitivism or to suggest violence, but for their expressive possibilities.

Spieler's thesis and his evident grasp of French and Italian art notwithstanding, Beckmann's work remains, to American eyes, at any rate, stubbornly Northern, even Germanic, in its darkness, its density of form, its acerbic color, and, above all, its implicit heroic mythology. But ultimately such labeling is not very interesting. Obviously, everything that shaped Beckmann, that touched him, or that he saw in the course of his life as a painter, all of his most deeply held convictions, found their way, in some fashion, into his work. That's part of what makes it so powerful. As this exhibition shows, Beckmann is a first-rate painter whose work is vivid, original, tough, and current. That's all anyone could ask for.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two early poems *by T. S. Eliot*

As Wallace Stevens once confided to Donald Hall regarding poets' juvenilia, "Some of one's early things give one the creeps." T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) was similarly skittish about the contents of a leather-bound notebook of poems dating from 1909. Eliot sold the notebook to his patron John Quinn on the condition that the "unpublished and unpublishable" verses never find their way into print. Against the unwanted airing of a poet's apprentice work, however, the fireplace seems the only summary defense, for now, nearly thirty years after the manuscript was unearthed in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, an edition of the early poems, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, has been commissioned by Valerie Eliot and painstakingly prepared by Christopher Ricks.

In their weaker moments, Eliot's fledgling verses provide highly revealing insights into the formation of his poetic sensibility; in their stronger, they contain the nascent strains of an inimitable, thoroughly familiar music—the music of the mature voice, among the finest in this century. What Eliot wrote of John Webster rings true for his own work in the Berg Notebook: his "mind was of the reservoir type. He needed to accumulate for a long time before he could transmute into real poetry." The ingredients which Eliot gathered for his early poems (and which are sprinkled throughout the Notebook) have been much remarked on: the sources of inspiration, he wrote, for young poets after 1910 "are to be found in the earlier symbolist poets of France . . . in Baudelaire and his immediate followers, Laforgue, Corbière, Rimbaud and Mallarmé," as well as in the poets and playwrights of the Tudor-Stuart period, among others.

As Eric Sigg notes in *The American T. S. Eliot* (Cambridge, 1989), the Symbolist movement, which Eliot came to through the writings of Arthur Symons,

> grasps at extremes, adopting the extraordinary as its norm. . . . Eliot borrowed something of Laforgue's method, which Symons described as a kind of travesty, incorporating odd and unusual, "nonpoetic words" and subtly allusive, factitious, and reflected meanings. Laforgue combined these meanings in a kind of serious play by lampooning sentimentalism, treating trivial matters seriously, and juxtaposing colloquial and high diction.

While the two products of Eliot's literary gleanings printed below, "Mandarins" (1910) and "Paysage Triste" (1914?), hark back to the Symbolists, they forecast in their repetitions, echoes, cadences, lexicon, and mixed diction Eliot's more accomplished work. If on the whole the juvenilia lack the polish of the contemporaneous verse later published in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), it is nevertheless thrilling to hear in these formative poems the initial notes of that Eliotic rag.

—*David Yezzi*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mandarins

I

Stands there, complete,
Stiffly addressed with sword and fan:
What of the crowds that ran,
Pushed, stared, and huddled, at his feet,
Keen to appropriate the man?

Indifferent to all these baits
Of popular benignity
He merely stands and waits
Upon his own intrepid dignity;
With fixed regardless eyes—
Looking neither out nor in—
The centre of formalities.

A hero! and how much it means;
How much—
The rest is merely shifting scenes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

2

Two ladies of uncertain age
Sit by a window drinking tea
(No persiflage!)
With assured tranquillity
Regard
A distant prospect of the sea.
The outlines delicate and hard
Of gowns that fall from neck and knee;
Grey and yellow patterns move
From the shoulder to the floor.

By attitude
It would seem that they approve
The abstract sunset (rich, not crude).

And while one lifts her hand to pour
You have the other raise
A thin translucent porcelain,
Murmurs a word of praise.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

3

The eldest of the mandarins,
A stoic in obese repose,
With intellectual double chins,
Regards the corner of his nose;

The cranes that fly across a screen
Pert, alert,
Observe him with a frivolous mien—
Indifferent idealist,
  World in fist,
    Screen and cranes.

And what of all that one has missed!
And how life goes on different planes!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

4

Still one more thought for pen and ink!
(Though not indicative of spleen):
How very few there are, I think
Who see their outlines on the screen.
And so, I say, I find it good
(Even if misunderstood)
That demoiselles and gentlemen
Walk out beneath the cherry trees,
The goldwire dragons on their gowns
Expanded by the breeze.
The conversation dignified
Nor intellectual nor mean,
And graceful, not too gay . . .

And so I say
How life goes well in pink and green!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Paysage triste

The girl who mounted in the omnibus
The rainy day, and paid a penny fare
Who answered my appreciative stare
With that averted look without surprise
Which only the experienced can wear
A girl with reddish hair and faint blue eyes

An almost denizen of Leicester Square.
We could not have had her in the box with us
She would not have known how to sit, or what to wear
Yet if I close my eyes I see her moving
With loosened hair about her chamber
With naked feet passing across the skies

She would have been most crudely ill at ease
She would not have known how to sit, or what to wear
Nor, when the lights went out and the horn began
Have leaned as you did, your elbow on my knees
To prod impetuously with your fan
The smiling stripling with the pink soaped face
Who had your opera-glasses in his care.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

Two cheers for Andrew Lloyd Webber

by Mark Steyn

I wonder if it isn't time to put in a kind word for Andrew Lloyd Webber. I stand second to none in the buckets of ordure I've dumped on him over the years, but, reading the casual swipes he's taken in these pages from both Roger Scruton and Roger Kimball, I find myself suddenly warming to the old boy. For one thing, in the increasing tension between economic conservatism and social conservatism, Lloyd Webber represents one of the more benign examples of cultural capitalism unleashed, lacking even the shallow, dreary progressive moralizing of Disney. More importantly, the fact of Lloyd Webber's immense popularity suggests a widespread public demand for the kind of bourgeois musical culture whose loss Dr. Scruton rightly mourns and whose absence is proving increasingly catastrophic.

Moreover, unlike the patrons of Gilbert and Sullivan or Rogers and Hammerstein, today's Lloyd Webber fans have had to maintain their devotion against a barrage of contempt from all sides. Everyone despises Lloyd Webber: highbrows, lowbrows, even the Broadway middlebrows he's supplanted. "I wouldn't mind," one distinguished "serious" composer said, "but bloody hell, he thinks he's Mozart." The old Broadway saw might have been invented for him: "Nobody likes him but the public." There is no cachet to owning a Lloyd Webber cast album—quite the opposite, since both the elite and the mass media have agreed between them that what's of value in popular culture is "dangerous," "on the edge," etc. Yet the highlights CD of the *Phantom* London cast has been on the U.S. album chart for over seven years. This isn't the record-industry bigshots cashing in, either: their horizons are now so narrow, their long-term vision barely stretching beyond the life expectancy of a gangsta rapper, that Lloyd Webber was obliged to set up his own record company to promote his works.

Whether it's as good as its predecessors is another matter. The golden-age show tune had a sort of muscular delicacy—"a trip to the moon on gossamer wings," in Cole Porter's marvelous phrase. Hearing the much-reprised main theme of Lloyd Webber's *Aspects of Love*, "Love Changes Everything," go ballooning up to a big, bellowed B-flat, I long for the colloquial modesty of, say, Jerome Kern's "Yesterdays," which says everything it needs to say within the narrowest range (a tenth). By comparison, Lloyd Webber is pompous, po-faced, portentous. But, these days, who isn't? It's the vernacular of the times: if we intend to crack down on earnest, hollow, overwrought, declarative posturing, let's start on Al Gore's convention speeches before beating up on *The Phantom of the Opera*. Besides, there are respectable precedents for the loss of lightly worn wit: the history of musical theater, in whatever form, across the centuries, is one of major gag-amputation, of total jokectomy. Opera from Mozart to Puccini, operetta from Offenbach

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to Lehar, musicals from Porter to Lloyd Webber: as its practitioners refine the form, jokes, satire, fun are flushed out until all that remains is ponderous, foursquare romance. In this, at least, Lloyd Webber is part of an illustrious tradition.

But, above all, Lloyd Webber is one of the last exponents of the pre-ironic—which is surely a reason to treasure him. There is no postmodern cross-referencing in his shows, no spurious "relevance." Quite the opposite: for all they connect with what's going on around them, *Cats* and *Starlight Express* might as well have been flown in from outer space. They are in and of themselves. And when Lloyd Webber does venture into cultural references, not for him the same instantly recognizable images from Hollywood movies and baby-boom TV nostalgia. The score of *Phantom* calls for a show-within-the-show, a nineteenth-century opera called *Hannibal*: Lloyd Webber's music for this scene is perfect mock-Meyerbeer, a droll joke since, before Lloyd Webber, it was Meyerbeer whose name was synonymous with empty, second-rate, overblown wannabe-opera.

Later, when the Phantom presents the Paris Opera with his score for *Don Juan Triumphant*, the star objects and demands something more conventional—no surprise really, for Lloyd Webber has used the whole-tone scale, which at the end of the nineteenth century was confined mostly to Debussy and a few other innovators; thus, Lloyd Webber establishes the Phantom's credentials as a musical radical, confirmed a few minutes later when the chorus for *Don Juan Triumphant* seems to prefigure Britten. I don't suppose one in ten thousand theatergoers spots half of this, but it's worth pausing to marvel: in a present-tense culture unable to do anything but constantly refer back and forth to itself, Lloyd Webber has a massive hit, more profitable than *ET* or *Independence Day*, in which the cultural references are to Meyerbeer and Debussy.

But the best way to consider Lloyd Webber's merits, or at any rate his basic efficiency, is to consider the alternatives—such as *Randy Newman's Faust*, currently at the not-for-profit Goodman Theatre in Chicago but ultimately Broadway bound. If the title seems a touch proprietorial, then presumably it's to avoid confusion with Goethe's *Faust*, or Gounod's or Boito's, or Marlowe's or Thomas Mann's or Berlioz's, or even Johann Faust's *Faust*, the posthumous memoir by the German conjurer which started the ball rolling. To be honest, there's little danger of muddling Newman with Goethe or Gounod, though, just for the record, on closer inspection of the *Playbill*, this version is actually *Randy Newman's* (and David Mamet's) *Faust*.

Newman is a singer-songwriter with a cult following, a humorist whose chosen form happens to be the pop lyric and who prefers to write character songs. This has caused him difficulties in the rock business, where songs are supposed to be a form of self-expression. His minor 1970s hit "Short People" wound up being denounced by spokespersons for the vertically challenged, unable to differentiate between the character's voice and the author's. Incredible as it may seem today, when such stories are routine, in 1978 it was sufficiently rare to earn the song a kind of lasting fame. Since then, Newman, nephew of two fine film composers (Lionel and Alfred), has divided his time between pop albums and movie scores, most notably for the screen adaptation of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*. His is one of those names that always come up when folks bemoan the state of the Broadway musical: "What a shame the theater can't attract someone like Randy Newman"—or Paul Simon, or Tom Waits.

As a lyricist adept at delineating character in songs and a composer experienced in scoring full-length dramas, Newman would seem to be especially qualified. Plus, if you've got a rock songwriter, chances are you'll get a better class of co-author: the hipper dramatists would never dream of writing a musical with Jerry Herman or Kander and Ebb, but they're susceptible to approaches from more exotic quarters.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

David Mamet has given us innumerable theatrical visions of hell, most recently in his audition-for-the-afterlife sketch in *Death-Defying Acts*, but his contribution here, as Newman's co-author on the book, is hard to discern. One aside, when Lucifer hears Hitler complaining that his dog is ill again and snaps back "Fuck him!," sounds like a Mamet interpolation. There's also a "Fuck you!" Mamet moment when Satan, dropping by to visit God, tells a murdered child that her killer will still get into heaven. But the viciousness of this exchange seems to have drifted in from some other play entirely. Other than that, Mamet's contribution seems to be a bit of last-minute play-doctoring that can't conceal the desperation of the enterprise.

Newman marks out his turf early on. In Goethe's version, Heinrich Faust is a scholar tempted to barter his soul in his quest for the unknown; in Newman's version, Henry Faust is . . . a jerk. To be more precise, he's a dopey, Gen X slacker from Notre Dame wielding an electric guitar. But the key difference is that, as a disaffected grunger, he doesn't seem to have much of a soul to lose, and, if he does, he doesn't care about it anyway. He signs it away out of sheer boredom: "I'm gettin' somethin' for nothin', right?" This is very bad play-making: if he doesn't care, what's at stake? Where's the drama? Why should we think his soul's worth fighting over if he doesn't?

It may be that Newman, in downgrading Faust from seeker after knowledge to bonehead, is making a comment on the degradation of our seats of learning. But it's more likely he simply plumped for the most instantly accessible persona, an updated version of the hippy-dippy simpletons who twenty years ago were drifting gormlessly through entertainments like *Pippen* and even *Godspell*. The latter explanation is supported when Faust grows suspicious about his rewards. The joke here is that Lucifer is —the worst sin of all—uncool: he foolishly promises to make young Faust "a famous recording artist, like Steve Lawrence or Eydie Gorme." Who says the Devil has all the best tunes?

And so here we go again. Where Goethe's *Faust* was an epic disquisition on the destiny of man, Newman's is Steve and Eydie jokes—the same instantly digestible, instantly forgettable circular references as every other movie and play and TV show. Perhaps Newman is commenting on the spiritual bankruptcy of our culture, on the difficulty of even raising one's sights to spiritual considerations in a world that prefers to recycle the same leaden, earth-bound stereotypes. But I doubt it. The slicker lines suggest, if anything, just the familiar skepticism of a secular age: Lucifer tells God that chances are they're only figments of man's imagination. But, on the evidence of this show, man's imagination isn't that imaginative.

Faust is staged by the "hot" "new" director of *Rent*, Michael Greif—a production decision that sounds like a Faustian bargain gone badly haywire. Whatever the reasons for *Rent*'s success, the direction had nothing to do with it. Here, faced with Newman's quirky, eclectic score, Greif has opted to bury it in money and turn it into a compilation show of recent Broadway hits. Thus, the Prince of Darkness is now a Vegas slicker in a goatee and satin suit—like Jerry Lewis's Devil in that far more adroit Faustian musical *Damn Yankees*, though, it has to be said, lacking Lewis's air of menace. There are also moving platforms and stairways—the pared-down scaffolding staging of *Smokey Joe's Café*—though the minimalist effect is rather undercut by lavish video projections reminiscent of *Tommy*. And, when Greif has run out of current hits to sample, he just goes for whatever takes his fancy: there's a crowd scene from *Evita*, a Thirties movie fantasy, a God who seems to be on loan from *Green Pastures* . . .

It's true that Goethe's *Faust* lurches abruptly from broad farce to deep tragedy and most stops in between (one reason why it's so hard to stage), but with Goethe the stylistic shifts and changes in verse form are part of the play's epic sweep; with Greif and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

co., the stylistic shifts testify only to the production's shriveled vision. David Freeman's 1988 staging at the Lyric Hammersmith in London had plenty of spectacle, but it rose organically from the poetry. Greif's effects, by contrast, seem the worst kind of crowd-pandering. Faust's diabolic pact leads him through a cavalcade of historical figures—Caligula, Napoleon, and Beethoven, who speaks heavily accented English: "I hate it when they do that in movies," sneers the Devil. Hell, said Sartre, is other people. In Newman's version, it seems that Hell is other people's jokes.

As the evening progresses and the dimwit hero wanders from episode to episode, it seems less *Faust* and more *Candide*. The fact that Candide never changes, never learns is what's made the work so difficult to adapt—and certainly the Leonard Bernstein/Richard Wilbur version wasn't helped by enlisting Lillian Hellman to tie leg-weights to the book. But Bernstein's music, though romping giddily through the conventions and clichés of opera and operetta, is a coherent, unified score in its composer's own voice—never more ravishing than in its gorgeous, final a cappella chorus, "Make Your Garden Grow." Newman is a facile mimic—of ragtime, gospel, Vegas production numbers, Kurt Weill, Kurt Cobain, you name it—but there never seems much point to the pastiche other than to tick another item on the checklist: been there, done that.

The result is unsatisfying on both lyrical and musical grounds: in the music, a distinctive authorial voice never emerges, whereas, in the lyrics, a knowing authorial voice keeps insinuating itself between you and the characters. *Faust* winds up as a feel-good revue, in which (as in Mimi's return from the dead in *Rent*) Faust's apparent suicide need be no obstacle to a happy ending. Newman's and Mamet's names on the marquee were enough to attract all the big-time critics to Chicago, but, honestly, if these are the guys who are going to save the American musical, we're better off with *The Phantom of the Opera* pop-up book. As a testament to Newman's own Faustian bargain with his collaborators, this *Faust* winds up as an accidental meditation on the banality of modern theatrical spectacle.

One director who could have breathed life into Newman's *Faust* is Bob Fosse—though, had he lived, even Fosse might have tired of sardonic commedia dell'arte vaudevilles by now. His general approach to dramatic material was never better distilled than in his first hit movie: "Life is a cabaret, old chum." While his fellow superstar choreographers struggled to expand the dramatic possibilities of show dance, Fosse seemed to flourish in its limitations. By *Chicago*, he had it down to a fine art. With John Kander and Fred Ebb, he musicalized an old Maurice Watkins/George Abbott hit from the Twenties, loosely based on a real story. In *Chicago*, Roxie Hart murders her lover and, after the usual circus of a trial, cashes in on her fame and goes into vaudeville. In the finale, Roxie and fellow killer-diller Velma throw flowers to the audience as if to say, "Screw you, suckers. You bought it, too."

Chicago opened the same year as *A Chorus Line*—1975. One elevates show business into the noblest metaphor for the American Dream, the other revels in show business as a huckster's travesty of it. It was no contest: *A Chorus Line* became a beloved institution, the apotheosis of America's most enduring myth, while *Chicago*'s cynicism eventually exhausted its audience. But look at today's tabloid grotesques: Amy Fisher, the Long Island Lolita who parlayed her exploits into TV movies for all three networks; Lorena Bobbitt, the penis-severing manicurist who, like Demi Moore and Goldie Hawn, went on to pose for *Vanity Fair*. . . As it happens, having been living in a cave, I first heard about the Bobbitt case from Gwen Verdon, the original star of *Chicago*. "Watch what the media do with this," she said. "It'll be just like *Chicago*."

Quite. "In this town," says the corrupt prison madam, "murder is a form of entertainment." You'd have thought that, in the age of O.J., this would be a show whose

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

time had come—a dark satire played out to a delicious series of Jazz Age parodies. As Roxie's attorney puts it, bamboozling yet another jury:

> Give 'em the old
> Razzle Dazzle
> Bead and feather 'em . . .

And he does, every time. "If Jesus Christ had lived in Chicago and had $5,000," he says, "things would have turned out differently." But musicals have gotten so used to being about nothing else other than other, older, better musicals you've already seen that, faced with a rare point of contact with contemporary America, they freeze in terror. Instead of playing to its strengths, the revival of *Chicago* has been staged as a sort of *hommage à* Fosse, albeit one he would have found frightfully bloodless. The evening begins with an announcement from a Fosse lookalike—in his trademark black derby, dangling cigarette, black vest, baggy pants, big boots. Ann Reinking, a Fosse protégée, has choreographed in the manner of her mentor—the splayed legs, the bumps and thrusts, the erotic exhibitionism. Everyone is dressed in black, the skeletal set has a hard disco sheen. Consequently, the production seems to be as much about nostalgia for Fosse's Seventies heyday as for the late Twenties in which the drama is set and which the score evokes so irresistibly, in its withering parodies of Bert Williams, Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor, and Helen Morgan.

Fosse could have made the clash of sight and sound work: although he was as nostalgic for the good ol' songs as anybody else on Broadway, he gave them a slick contemporary gloss. But Fosse's dead. Walter Bobbie is the nominal director of this revival, and he seems to be out playing golf for all the evidence of any directorial hand. The drama seems to have disconnected from the dance: the movements, the poses, the vaudevillian "give" moments are more calculated than they should be; they don't seem to flow naturally from character.

It's not about justice, it's about presentation—that's as true in the theater as it is in the courtroom. In exposing the old razzle-dazzle, Fosse dazzled us. Bobbie's production (at the Richard Rogers, where the original played twenty years ago) can't match the style, or Fosse's cast. As Roxie and Velma, the 1975 *Chicago* had Miss Verdon and Chita Rivera, two of the last theater stars. Gwen Verdon's great gift is to be able to project both sensuality and vulnerability: her Roxie was a tramp on the make, but there were crucial moments when she seduced the audience into sympathy. Don't look for that here: Miss Reinking, as Roxie, and Bebe Neuwirth, as Velma, are two technically brilliant dancers but very hard performers. They leave the audience cold; I doubt whether they could fool a jury. *Chicago* is Kander and Ebb's best pastiche score and shows what they're capable of when they've got something to sink their teeth into, but this production is a missed opportunity.

Which brings us back, inevitably, to Lloyd Webber. One of the things that so irks his critics is his habit of annexing other fellows' territory. Mamet shows sound like Mamet, Fosse shows look like Fosse: they know what they do best. Maybe because nobody thinks he does anything best, Lloyd Webber disdains such categorizations: he's written a song cycle and a series of dance variations on Paganini, and both ended up as West End hits; he adapted a hymn by Sir Hubert Parry and wrote a Requiem, and both got into the Hit Parade; this Christmas, with some help from Madonna, he'll endeavor to revive that long dead form, the film musical. There are other composers one might prefer as writers of films and Requiems and song cycles, arrangers of hymns, and adapters of cello variations, but, for some reason, they don't bother—or, if they do, they can't get them on.

Lloyd Webber's one failure to date has been his only attempt at musical comedy: *Jeeves* (1975), adapted from P. G. Wodehouse, who, with Jerome Kern and Guy Bolton, more or less invented American

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

musical comedy at the Princess Theatre eighty years ago. Twenty years on, Lloyd Webber's lone flop is back, renamed *By Jeeves* and a hit in the West End; en route for New York, it's currently playing at Goodspeed's tiny Norma Terris Theatre in Chester, Connecticut. On his big shows, the composer tends to swamp his collaborators to the point where they're invisible; on *By Jeeves*, he's left most of the work to his librettist-lyricist-director Alan Ayckbourn. So, unusually, we have a Lloyd Webber musical that's really more of a play punctuated by the odd song. It opens at the village hall in Little Whittam, with Bertie Wooster bounding onstage for a solo recital:

> Banjo Boy
> Banjo Boy
> Play a number for me . . .

At which point he realizes he's strumming a frying pan. While Jeeves arranges for a replacement banjo to be found, Bertie holds the fort by using the props and chaps to hand to relate one of his old adventures. This is a framing device which Wodehouse, an expert theater technician, would have dismissed as hopelessly contrived. But it has two advantages. First, it allows Ayckbourn to slip into the narrative voice, which is at least 60 percent of the fun with Wodehouse's novels: "I staggered back appalled," says Bertie, staggering back, appalled. Secondly, it allows Ayckbourn to turn the evening into an exercise in the charm of amateurishness. This is a peculiarly English taste which the Americans have never cared for: on Broadway, when the kids say, "Gee, let's do the show right here," it's all guts and tap-shoes; in England, when the kids say, "Let's do the show right here," well, it turns out pretty much as you'd expect from a bunch of amateurs. Ayckbourn's concept takes a while to get going, but, once it does, everything falls into place. There are delightfully dotty moments, as when Bertie, Sir Watkyn Bassett, and the American jam billionaire stalk each other around the fountain endlessly reintroducing themselves:

> "How do you do?"
> "How do you do?"
> "Hallo again."
> "How goes it all?"

The number is reminiscent in theme of an obscure Gershwin duet, "The Babbitt and the Bromide" (after Sinclair Lewis and Gelett Burgess):

> "Hello."
> "How are you?"
> "Howza folks?"
> "What's new?"

But Lloyd Webber's music isn't mock-Gershwin or Twenties pastiche. The songs are in his own voice, but with a lightness he rarely uses these days. Under Ayckbourn's direction, the American cast's English accents are mostly spot on; Jeeves is a disappointment, but John Scherer's stumbling, harassed Bertie is a joy.

So, after the bombast of *Cats* and *Starlight Express*, we now have a truly English musical: like *Salad Days*, a huge and beloved London hit in the Fifties, it's the kind of shambling village-hall entertainment that in the pre-Lloyd Webber era the British adored but the Americans had no time for. If Ayckbourn and Lloyd Webber can sell that to Broadway, they'll have pulled off an extraordinary feat. But once again it's Lloyd Webber providing his own competition. Sick of *Phantom* and *Sunset*? Here's the season's only "intimate" musical. Long for the days of musical comedy? Here's the season's only new musical comedy. The neatest joke in *By Jeeves* comes when Bertie is required to recreate a motor journey and improvises a car out of a sofa on an upturned table with cardboard boxes front and rear and "Brrm! Brrm!" noises provided by Bertie himself. That really is a rebuke to Broadway: after years of being reviled for his dependency on spectacular staging effects, Lloyd Webber has now turned in the best spoof of his own techno-musicals.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

No fuss or muss: Ellsworth Kelly in the rotunda

by Mario Naves

Ellsworth Kelly and the Guggenheim Museum were made for each other. If it has become all but obligatory, before discussing any show at the uptown Guggenheim, to gripe about the museum's inhospitality to art, then it must be conceded that his work feels at home in Frank Lloyd Wright's rotunda. Kelly is an artist for whom the marriage of art and architecture has long been a fundamental concern, and his cognizance of how space and art shape each other is keen. Walking up the second rung of the museum and coming upon a balcony overlooking a gallery housing some of Kelly's largest canvases is an agreeable experience. These pieces, with their skewed and sloping curves, carry on a conversation with Wright's building that is sympathetic and often funny. Kelly undoubtedly had input (and probably a few sleepless nights as well) over how best to exhibit his art at the Guggenheim, and his retrospective is marked by a master's sense of execution. Although "Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective"[1] contains over 250 objects, occupying almost the entire museum, it is never a chore to walk through. Indeed, the exhibit makes for a pleasurable stroll.

The cardinal reason for this is that Kelly's *oeuvre* is resolute—utterly so, one is tempted to add. His is an art of single-minded clarity and there is no fuss or muss at the Guggenheim. With the exception of his collages and drawings, which are more open to chance and process, there are no untidy patches in Kelly's geometries. His abstractions take as their inspiration fragments of observed reality: the way shadows on a stairwell establish their own staccato rhythm or afternoon light falling on an architectural detail creates random angles. (Some of these are recorded in the artist's photographs included here.) Shape, color, contour, and mass are then carefully configured, so that each piece maximizes the intensity of concentrated, not to say minimal, formal means. What the viewer is finally presented with is an art where the false starts and wrong turns have been eliminated. We feel the consideration in each piece and appreciate the decisions the artist has made. No one will ever mistake Kelly for anything but a serious artist.

While "Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective" is filled with paintings and sculpture, one leaves the exhibition not quite thinking of

1 "Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective" opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, on October 18, 1996, and remains on view through January 15, 1997. The show will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (February 16–May 18, 1997), the Tate Gallery, London (June 12–September 7, 1997), and the Haus der Kunst, Munich (November 1997–January 1998). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Diane Waldman, with essays by Miss Waldman, Roberta Bernstein, Carter Ratcliff, and Mark Rosenthal, has been published by the Guggenheim Museum (335 pages, $75; $42.95 paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kelly as a painter or a sculptor. He's not interested in the sensual qualities of paint; as a painter, he gets the job done. The brushstrokes that bunch up along the edge of the centralized form in *City Island* (1958) are as involved with paint handling as Kelly gets. Likewise, Kelly's sculpture rarely inhabits space as such but, instead, handsomely squats in a declarative manner. Consequently, one thinks of Kelly as being foremost an artist or, should one say, Artist. This distinction may seem niggling (or glib), but it is an important one. Kelly's work so consciously announces its status as art that it conveys neither enthusiasm nor passion. It commands respect. One imagines Kelly wants it that way.

Kelly came of age as an artist at a time when American art, specifically Abstract Expressionism, first garnered international attention. He spent his formative years in Paris, taking up residence there in 1948, and was at a geographical and psychological distance from the hurly-burly verities of the New York School. Much has been made of Kelly's European influences (he would leave Paris for New York in 1954) and of his contact with such seminal figures as Georges Vantongerloo and Constantin Brancusi. Only a dunce would deny the role European culture played in Kelly's maturation as an artist, but this emphasis has been overplayed. Writing in the catalogue, Diane Waldman contrasts Kelly's "sensibility shaped by his admiration for European culture" with the Abstract Expressionist's "new American art." There is a modicum of truth in this comparison. But it's hard to see how *Blue Ripe* (1959), an homage to Jean Arp and one of Kelly's best paintings, is any more European—or any less American—than, say, de Kooning's *Excavation*. Kelly's stylistic difference from Abstract Expressionism seems less indicative of influence than of personality. Kelly's poker-faced pragmatism can make him seem the quintessential homeboy, as American as mom, apple pie, and Jasper Johns.

Kelly's best-known works are his shaped canvases. They are also his most problematic. Although Kelly explored irregular supports early in his career, he did not do so consistently until the mid-1960s. It was then that he employed idiosyncratic supports that broke with the rectangular format while simultaneously referring, however obliquely, to it. The monochromatic *Yellow Piece* (1966), a canvas with two of its corners bending into curves, relies on the viewer's reading of it as an incomplete square for it to work. As a play on format, *Yellow Piece* is genial and not uncute. But the point of the rectangular support is that it provides a stable and, to an extent anyway, neutral support wherein the artist creates pictorial tension. Once this essential tenet has been violated, the canvas calls attention to itself primarily as an object and fails as a painting.

There are exceptions, of course, but only when the irregular format has an overriding basis in the painting's form, and then just barely. Kelly's shaped canvases may concern themselves with pictorial issues—say, the relationship between figure and ground—but they do so in a way that denies painting's metaphorical capabilities. His paintings, then, are simply things on the wall—pleasing to the eye in their proportions and color, to be certain—but things nonetheless. But what kinds of things are they exactly? "Unenclosed by the usual rectangle," writes Carter Ratcliff in his essay on Kelly's curved canvases, "Kelly's monochromes do not establish an impermeable barrier between pictorial space and the space of the gallery. Instead of resting within their own borders, they sweep across the wall . . . without the wall they would have no ground." That the wall serves as a ground for his shapes is obvious and Kelly's point. ("To hell with pictures—they should be the wall . . ." wrote the young artist to John Cage in September of 1950.) So why not paint such a cropped and swerving shape on a rectangular canvas? The painter Ross Neher once wrote that a Mondrian would cohere as an independent entity, as a painting, even if it were displayed on a garbage heap. Kelly's shaped canvases would not survive such a stringent

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

test; they are dependent on the spaces where they are displayed. The ropes cordoning them off at the Guggenheim aren't there to protect the pieces: they are there to force the viewer to back up and take in the wall as part of the work. Kelly's shaped canvases are about placement, lighting, architecture, and ornamentation; in short, elegant and oversized chachkas.

Kelly is a savvy decorator, however. The topmost tower gallery of the Guggenheim contains the triptych *Three Panels: Orange, Dark Gray, Green* (1986), as well as other shaped canvases, and the installation is inspired. The gallery is electric, swinging with rhythm and color. Standing in the center of it, one gets an appreciation for Kelly's attention to the subtleties of color, shape, and architectural space, for an art that (to paraphrase the artist himself) meets the eye directly. But neither is one tempted to ponder individual pieces for too long. Each piece has been so finely honed that it becomes, in a sense, perfect, and who needs that? The finest of Kelly's shaped canvases isn't, in fact, a canvas at all but a wide fan-like object created out of panels of birchwood. Perhaps *Curve XXI* (1978–80) succeeds because it is so bluntly itself, sidestepping Kelly's stuffy formalist machinations. Or maybe it's because the grain of the birchwood is as sensual a surface as one is likely to find in Kelly's work.

Those who think Kelly too steadfast an artist will favor his plant drawings and collages, and for good reason. It is here that Kelly relishes the creative process instead of honors it. His small, Dadaesque postcard collages are charming and proof positive that Kelly isn't always a sobersides. Part of the collages' appeal comes in recognizing motifs that have found their way into Kelly's larger works. The bent, elongated rectangle superimposed over the title figure in *Statue of Liberty* (1957) tells us almost as much about Ellsworth Kelly's notion of sculpture as some of his sculptures do. Kelly's plant drawings are beautifully rendered if, at times, a mite precious. (Even when relaxing Kelly can be on his guard.) *Lemon Branch* (1964), with its drooping leaves which gently touch the bottom edge of the paper, is vintage Kelly in its equilibrium. Also of note is the mechanically kinetic *Fields on a Map* (1950) and *Alan Kelly, Sr.* (1982), a portrait of the artist's father on his deathbed and as concise a contour drawing as one could hope for.

In the October issue of *Artforum*, Michael Brenson writes that "Kelly's abstractions are not so much true to what he has seen as to the moment in which a flower or bunker makes its existence known. By being true to that moment . . . he has made attentiveness indispensable to the creative imagination." The work that best exemplifies this aspect of Kelly's vision are his photographs; they are, in many ways, definitive. Here Kelly's love of the mysteries of perception are celebrated instead of ratiocinated. The slow, tender arc of the snowbank in *Curve Seen from a Highway, Austerlitz, New York* (1970) is evocative and surprising in a way that his curved paintings never are. Devotees of Kelly's work may recognize these echoes of (as Brenson has it) "attentiveness" in the large pieces, but I wonder how true this is for the viewer who comes to the work cold, unfamiliar with the artist's working methods. Kelly's gift for shape, color, and scale are unquestionable and will make themselves known to anyone who takes the time to look at the work. But his ability to make them connect in ways that go beyond the merely accomplished is limited. There is little in "Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective" that will evoke strong emotion. There is, however, much to esteem. Perhaps it is enough that we should be grateful for small gifts in big packages.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dance

Milken on the beach in China

by Laura Jacobs

Just minutes into Karol Armitage's *The Predators' Ball: Hucksters of the Soul*—her new multi-media theater piece presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in October—I couldn't stop thinking of that strange, hothouse creature of the 1940s and 1950s, the dream ballet. These twenty-minute "ballets," the expression of a character's dream or fantasy, pinpointed the show's inner conflict, poeticized it. They worked within the Broadway musical as the show's high-art cadenza, a wordless tour de force. And they reflected the Freudian analysis that was *de rigueur* with the literary set, not to mention neurotic Broadway types, in mid-twentieth-century America. Couched late in the show, surrealistically staged and often sophomorically symbolic, dream ballets were little landscapes of the subconscious: an epiphany inside a pirouette. Recreated in the movie versions of Broadway shows, the ballets were opened up, filmed on vast sound stages—ninety parts sky to ten parts people—as if to stress the unrealness of the dream, its atmosphere of gravity without weight. It is on film, in fact, in movies like *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *An American in Paris*, and *Singin' in the Rain*, that most of us saw our first dream ballet. It had become a deep pocket in a celluloid strip.

I was thinking of the dream ballet because so much of what now passes for storytelling on the stage is not actual narrative but the twenty-minute dream ballet expanded to fill a two- to three-hour time slot. BAM's Next Wave Festival specializes in this species of theater—indeed, has been actively breeding it for fourteen years. The big bang, of course, was *Einstein on the Beach*. The big flop, *Endangered Species* (the title referring less to the animals forced into postmodern posturing than to the theater as we once knew it.)

In its progressive programming, BAM has actively sought and supported works of performance art or *Tanztheater* or dreamscape or "opera" (quotation marks part of the word)—pieces unmoored from genre, defying categorization. The spacey, irradiated picturings of Robert Wilson's stage, the circle of hairy Hell that is an evening with Pina Bausch, the aggressive abstracts of Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker, Martha Clarke's morphing narratives—it's a theater of dreamy, free, often too free, association. Even the operas, usually composed by Philip Glass (*Einstein on the Beach*, the recent Cocteau trilogy) or John Adams (*Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*), their loop music scores gliding like a tracking shot without end, spin forth as film from a reel. At BAM, it's as if the film form of the dream ballet had been airmailed back to the east coast stage, complete with imploded horizon line and a sproketed sense of the void. Weightless gravity was alive and well in New York City.

"I wanted to make a kind of post-MTV production where image and a cinematic

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

style could tell a story with all this kind of dance and movement around it." That's Karol Armitage talking about *The Predators' Ball*, her post-MTV dreamscape evocation of the rise and fall of leveraged buyout king Michael Milken.

Armitage is a BAM baby. Though her early choreography was presented in New York's downtown spaces where, doing a post-structuralist turn as Suzanne Farrell, she found her super-sophisticated following, Armitage's later and worst work premiered at BAM. It was the Eighties, and she was flush with a Guggenheim, a famous fiancé (David Salle, who also had a Guggenheim —how's that for *matching grants*?), a commission from Baryshnikov at American Ballet Theatre, hip clothes and a punk hairdo (or punk clothes and a hip hairdo), and—talk about having it all—friendship with the Material Girl herself, Madonna. And she tried to put it all on the stage. As early as *The Mollino Room* for ABT you could see that the Salle presence in her work had a deadening effect—the sourball backdrops he did for her dances were pure pose and attitude, no movement, no volume. But Salle was cultural capital, and he remained a big influence in her two-act work that premiered at BAM in 1987, *The Elizabethan Phrasing of Albert Ayler.*

Pointe shoes in film dream ballets, especially when they were in Technicolors other than pink, always smacked of exotic, self-conscious artiness (after all, in the context of the film, they'd come out of nowhere). And that's how Karol Armitage has always worn her pointes—as if the camera were running. *Elizabethan Phrasing* was really more of a home movie than a ballet, a séance in the living room, object lessons floating by: here's our jazz pics, our Fifties furnishings, our flea market/art market classicism, our cultural cachet (or was it cache-pots?). In these pages, Jed Perl remarked on the acquisitive nature of the Armitage/Salle sensibility. [1] No wonder they're attracted to Milken.

The one thing Armitage couldn't do, and it became more apparent with every premiere, was "extend classicism"—everybody's misguided mission in post-Balanchine ballet. Souping it up with SoHo symbolism, girding up in black leather, cracking a whip while doing the *développés* of one of Balanchine's bachantes, Armitage didn't look bad (rather, she looked *baaaaad, man*). Still it was always the Karol Armitage Show, not classical expression evolved but a commentary on where that expression was forced to go kicking. If Suzanne Farrell dancing Balanchine was a story within a story (woman as dream ballet!), Armitage dancing Armitage was lipstick on the mirror—kisses to the congnescenti, and exit lines.

The funny thing about *The Predators' Ball* is that it doesn't even look like Karol Armitage, but like BAM. When young Michael Milken scribbles mathematical formulas on a blackboard, I found myself thinking of *Einstein on the Beach*. Next came *Nixon in China*: there's that keening kind of not-quite-aria-not-quite-recetitive singing, and in the role of Milken, Thomas Jay Ryan looks and sounds compellingly like Nixon. The video screen that was rolled on stage from time to time worked its own déjà vu: Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here* was *still here*. In that post-MTV dance-document, video screens were a shortcut to simile (pick an image, any image) and also a weird opiate: put a screen, no matter how small, onstage and people will strain to watch the screen instead of the live performers.

As for Armitage's choreography, it has finally succumbed to the Nineties norm, what might be called post-perspective classicism. This is ballet that uses classical steps but without any deep feeling for the interior space of the stage, its invisible but formidable tiers and meta-dimensions. The result is an incessant chorus-line look, rows of synchronized movement with punched up dynamics, or simple kicks and leaps in canon. The only way to get crescendo out of such flat composition is either to throw

1 See "From September to December," by Jed Perl, in *The New Criterion* (February 1988).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more dancers on the stage or to fake the effect with speed and stretch, a kind of dancing *in extremis*. William Forsythe and Peter Martins are the main practitioners of PPC, and Armitage has joined the club. When she introduces a lone girl who *bourrées* and balances in a white unitard—Idealism! Hope!—it's so out of context it's corny. Extending classicism may no longer be Karol's concern, but when did she go tone deaf?

I notice that I haven't described the show yet. Score: a mix of fashion show music (i.e., Eurodisco) and poignant symphonic by Georges Delerue. Lighting: Palladium dark, dank, with neon highlights—Wall Street awake at 4:00 A.M. Costumes: predominantly suits and suspenders (great looking in full-corps scenes). Narrative strategy No. 1: scenes built on symbols, such as the section about Milken's X-shaped conference table (dancers made X signs with their arms and legs), or the almost-exciting sequence of Ron Perelman's hostile takeover of Revlon, symbolized by supermodels (the scene accumulates well, but has no physical momentum behind the confrontation—it "tells" rather than "shows"). Narrative strategy No. 2: name that echo. Who's the guy in the silver suit? (Thyades, a Caliban-type sprite); what are those weird chairs with telephones? (Quotrons designed as if by Kandinsky); who does that insinuating voice-over sound like? (HAL, the computer from *2001: A Space Odyssey*).

Reviewers noted that although the show didn't add up to much, it was always lively. Is keeping the audience distracted the same as drawing it in? Considering how fast the show moved, it was surprising how soon into each scene one's attention flagged—Armitage's quick cutting wasn't always MTV-quick enough. The actual ballroom scene, which came near the end of the show and might have been a glittering and meticulous *coup de théâtre*, was a sloppy letdown. Costumed in high court French decadence, it predictably devolved into a tacky orgy.

At the end of a long voice-over in which HAL details the genius of young Michael Milken, he finally says: "If you could get inside the head of a genius what would you find? You would find nothing at all—because you don't speak the language." This is a good summation of *The Predators' Ball*. Inside its lightboard of flashes, gimmicks, impressions, suggestions, projections, and tableaux, there is finally "nothing at all." That nothing is not what's missing from Milken, it's about Armitage: she doesn't have the language. In the days when she was trying to speak "in ballet," at least she knew she was working with syntax, diction, psychosexual history. There was the potential for sustained expression. Using MTV as a model for narrative technique, however, is just a quick and dirty grab at her subject.

But then, maybe Armitage doesn't care about Milken as much as she says she does, and she set out to make junk theater, the performance version of junk bonds. Or maybe she hadn't noticed that Robert Wilson's best works have momentous scores to help them cohere, that Pina Bausch brings a spectacular focus to her weary intellectual striptease. The only zing of concentration in *The Predators' Ball* came from a black rapper who appeared in the piece. The collected energy he brought to the stage was like a wake-up call—he had a language. A narrow, low-ceilinged language, yes, but in this setting its simple authority and dexterity were greater than all the angles Armitage played. Post-atomic, post-video, post-CD-ROM-and-Internet, post-text, post . . . next? At BAM the post-narrative world is more weightless than ever.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The media

A pretense of professionalism

by James Bowman

It wasn't exactly a notable witticism when David Brinkley remarked of President Clinton's lengthy and rather flowery victory speech that: "We all look forward with great pleasure to four years of wonderful, inspiring speeches, full of wit, poetry, music, love and affection, plus more goddamn nonsense." Nor was it one for the quotation dictionaries when he added that Clinton "has not a creative bone in his body. Therefore, he's a bore, and will always be a bore." Yet these unremarkable opinions were the talk of the country for days afterward. This was because people suddenly realized that for once, after months of tedious television coverage of a tedious election campaign, someone on television allowed to escape, in the language of men, a widely held opinion whose expression would ordinarily have been inhibited by journalistic "professionalism." Here was an obvious social *faux pas*—which was also a reminder of how, for months, the media had reported with a straight face one bit of "goddamn nonsense" after another, from both candidates, while never allowing themselves to perform the basic social service of *saying* that it was nonsense.

You may say that that is the price we pay for having a professional corps of journalists; but it is not exactly self-evident to me how anyone is supposed to benefit from journalists' being professionals—anyone, that is, except for the upwardly mobile journalists themselves. Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution notes in his new book of essays, *News and Newsmaking*, that it is "only in recent years" that journalists have joined lawyers, bankers, academics, and businessmen in the revolving door between public and private life that Richard Neustadt calls the game of "inners and outers." Obviously, this is a very good thing for the journalists, but how is it good for the rest of us? If journalists are beginning to treat with politicians as equals, to have political ambitions themselves, and to enjoy their new coziness with power, does it not follow as the night follows the day that they will be less effective as journalists?

Doctors and lawyers have been professionals for centuries, hacks only for a generation or two. And the consequence of their gentrification is there for all to see as each election campaign becomes more tawdry and mendacious than the last. For it is precisely the media's "professional" pose of detachment and "objectivity" which allows the politicians to engage in ever more outrageous liberties with truth, logic, sense, taste, and even ethics. "Where is the outrage?" cried the wounded Bob Dole in the closing weeks of the campaign, stung by the prospect of his impending defeat into uncharacteristic lucidity. Well might he ask! Some said that the outrage had simply been worn out by overuse during more than twenty years of Washington scandals, but I think it has been buried, in a lead-lined box,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

deep beneath the foundations of the new media's gleaming corporate headquarters.

That would be a good place and now would be a good time for the Left and the Right to join together to disinter it. Back in June, *The Nation* did a cover story on the corporate media which it referred to as "the national entertainment state." Four mega-corporations in particular—General Electric, Time Warner, Disney/Capital Cities/ABC and Westinghouse (how scaped Rupert Murdoch?)—were depicted as octopodi, reaching their tentacles into every nook and cranny of public speech, which between them they have succeeded in commodifying. In some ways this was just typical left-wing paranoia, but it makes in a different way the same point that I was trying to make last month in this space, which is that news and entertainment are becoming increasingly indistinguishable.

And the Left is correct to notice the considerable evils which follow from converting news and information into a fungible product, like soap powder or pork bellies. I would add that "objectivity" and "professionalism" are the means by which that conversion takes place, the natural concomitants of monopoly and an excessive regard for the bottom line. They knock the rough edges off the truth and allow the corporate bosses to sell their product to the largest cross-section of the market. It was therefore a considerable irony that when Bob Dole cried out, quite legitimately, against the "bias" of the media in winking at the peccadillos of his opponent, he was in truth complaining of the corporate culture with which he had spent his whole political life ingratiating himself. It may have been one reason why in the campaign's closing phases he looked—more than most presidential losers—like an almost tragic figure.

Unlike the Left, I don't know if it is possible to forbid the media giants from owning lots of television stations and newspapers without endangering freedoms which should be preserved. What I do know is that it is possible to make these media outlets less profitable for them and therefore less desirable to be owned. All that journalists would have to do would be to give up their absurd social pretensions, drop the ever more ridiculous pretense of "objectivity" and "professionalism," and admit, like David Brinkley (who, having announced his retirement, had nothing much to lose except, possibly, the privilege of asking the President on his last Sunday morning show a lot of inane questions to which he would surely receive a lot of inane answers), that they are as other men and can recognize "goddamn nonsense" when they see it.

What is the betting that *that* will ever happen? Journalists are too fond of the money and social status that they have achieved under the corporate aegis to be willing to give them up. They know that something is wrong, and they are actually encouraged to try to find out what it is, and to look for it everywhere except where it is. Impotent hand-wringing about "civility" or "horse-race journalism" or some such red herring is all part of the approved journalistic function. This is because self-criticism betokens the presence of that highly desirable commodity known as "objectivity" and it relieves the pressures which might otherwise produce cries of "goddamn nonsense"—cries from those who are *not* old and about to retire—directed at other people's public utterances.

One of the most amusing contributions to *The Nation*'s symposium on the corporate media came from James Fallows, then the lowly Washington editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, who acutely noted the deleterious effects on journalism of "the relentless earnings pressure that affects big, publicly traded corporations." A few weeks later, Fallows was assuring Mr. Mortimer Zuckerman (admittedly a bush leaguer by the standards of Time Warner or Westinghouse) that he could squeeze some more profits for him out of *U.S. News and World Report*. I don't wish to be too hard on Mr. Fallows for taking the job. Which of us can lay his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hand on his heart and swear that he would not leap at the chance to edit one of the three major newsweeklies—and be full of gratitude, too, to the Maecenas who made it all possible? But I do object to Fallows's notion, expressed in his book *Breaking the News*[1] that journalism needs more of what is already strangling it.

That is to say, more pompousness, more self-righteousness, more solemn guff about civic responsibilities. These are all things that choke the life out of public discourse and make it salable by the metric ton as a corporate product. An excellent piece by Michael Kelly in the issue of *The New Yorker* that came out the week before the election revealed what a complete disaster Fallows's much-touted "civic journalism" had been when it was tried out by a consortium of newspapers in North Carolina during the Helms-Gantt senatorial election. "The fraud," wrote Kelly, "was the notion that a self-selected group of reporters and editors somehow could or should determine the fit subjects for debate in an election." In the case of the North Carolina race, these subjects were deemed, as the result of a careful and scientific survey, to be Crime and Drugs, Taxes and Spending, Affordable Health Care, and Education.

What was completely ignored were the deep cultural, racial and even philosophical differences between Jesse Helms and Harvey Gantt which would otherwise have received an airing in the press instead of being confined to a series of attack ads on television. Kelly called the whole exercise "an attempt to increase the power of a journalistic upper class to dictate what are and are not fit subjects for public debate, and what are the proper reasons for choosing one candidate over another. It is an exercise in group-think. It is dishonest, in its attempt to pretend that the press's will represents merely the will of the people, as proved through polls that manipulated both the presentation of the issues and the results of the survey." The only person who came out of the business with any credit was Jesse Helms, who refused to have anything to do with it.

But for all the eruptions over "civic journalism" on its face, there has been too little consideration given to the consensus which lies just beneath the journalistic surface. David Brinkley may have expressed a common opinion about the quality of discourse in this year's political campaigns (as well as an opinion about the President), but so did David Broder when he wrote in *The Washington Post* that Clinton "ran a superb campaign." In spite of appearances, the two Davids are not really disagreeing. For what David Broder means is not that the President's campaign was rhetorically and intellectually satisfying to *him*. A superb campaign to him—as to virtually every other member of the elite Washington press corps—is a campaign which successfully bamboozles the boobs beyond the Beltway, who haven't the wit to see how the trick is done and how they are being manipulated.

Broder himself, that is, may not approve of the campaign any more than Brinkley does. In fact, as he is a thoroughly decent fellow, I'm sure that he does not. But he is constrained by his professionalism and journalistic detachment to admire its efficacy. It is another way of saying what his colleague, the television critic Tom Shales, said about Clinton in his "last speech of the last campaign"—"he was eloquent, he was funny, he was charming, he was magnificent."

> And a viewer watching this on C-Span, which generously carried the speech live and uncut, might well have thought to himself, "This guy deserves to be president again, if only because he enjoys it so much." Whatever else the next four years may be, they will probably be good TV.

If you were one of the people whose lives were actually affected by what Clinton does or doesn't do—a soldier, say, in Bosnia, or a

1 See my article on "The Press's Naïve Cynicism" in *The New Criterion* (March 1996).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

welfare mother looking for a job, or someone who made the mistake of investing in property in the Whitewater Estates—you would probably read these words with something of the same feelings as were expressed by a woman at a Dole rally in Houston who carried a sign (according to Michael Wines of *The New York Times*) reading: "Commun-ism, Social-ism, Journal-ism: fear Liberal Media Manipulation."

It is not so much that the media is "liberal," although it certainly is that. Its liberal bias will not prevent the media from turning on Clinton now that the election is over—as Fred Barnes in *The Weekly Standard* notes there are good reasons for thinking it will. It's not even that Clinton has done things that the press has not called him to account for, although he has. It's that media people are more and more tending to forget that anything beyond the image and the "spin" even exists. Maybe that soldier should be in Bosnia, maybe that welfare mother ought to be looking for a job and maybe even Whitewater property wasn't such a bad deal (at least if you kept up your payments). The point is that life is not TV, in spite of all the temptations these days to think that it is, and politics is not just a matter of dueling spin-doctors. It is also, and primarily, about real things happening to real people, and the journalistic professional, full of the shallow sophistry and cynicism which goes by the name of "hip," is always being encouraged by the rules of his trade to forget that.

And then the politicians are at liberty to forget it. *The New York Times* on Sunday before the election led its "Arts and Leisure" section with a piece by Robert Klein which tried to draw humorous comparisons between politics and showbiz, politicians and actors:

> Both callings are meritocracies of a sort, in the sense that if the public turns you down, you must obtain other work. The politician must be content with the humiliation of a Washington-based consulting job at five times his Government salary. The entertainer, busing tables.

But he goes on to note a new development in this permanent similarity:

> I don't know when it happened exactly, but somewhere along the line, the separation between theater and state broke down, and show biz and politics came crashing together with a blurry, amorphous thud.

And he goes on to assess the two candidates in straightforwardly theatrical terms:

> Bob Dole has become the Mike Dukakis of 1996 in that he is loath to play-act to the extent necessary to run an effective campaign for President in contemporary America. . . . Acting, Stanislavsky and Strasberg notwithstanding, is really pretending. And being presidential requires some of the most intricate pretending there is: pretending to be composed in a swirl of embarrassing charges, pretending to be slow to anger and impervious to insult. Mr. Clinton has learned his show-business lessons well. He answers sharply critical questions at news conferences with the cheerful patience of Friar Tuck. It is not that he lacks intelligence and charm or that none of his reactions and feelings are real. It's more that the prudent politician had best keep some things to himself, and remember that Edmund Muskie and Pat Schroeder wept in public and took political nose dives.

But what he says is not true. Not only are public tears (decorously held back) now much more acceptable, at least in men, but Clinton does *not* handle sharply critical questions well. Once he walked out of a news conference and several times he has blown his cool when this has happened in the last four years. The point is that it hasn't happened during the election campaign because (a) he has held no news conferences and (b) the only other time when he might have taken "sharply critical" questions, during the presidential debates, nobody, including the Republican candidate, thought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it worth his while to put any such questions.

That was a tacit recognition that the demands of the political theater took precedence over the real-world consequences of what happens there. Even Dole was forced to this recognition by the constant and probably justified warnings against his appearing "mean," which would have been counterproductive. It's just a pity that someone didn't point out to him that it was also counterproductive for him to look unnaturally genial—and therefore cowed and afraid to ask the kinds of questions which would have upset the smooth predictability and with it the theatrical effectiveness of the debate. On television, everything is forgivable except a poor performance. Dole always looked like a man who had been reluctantly convinced of what he had to do, but who was unable to do it. Like a rabbit caught in the headlights, he could do nothing but watch as the pitiless Clinton juggernaut rolled over him.

It was almost as if he had a conscience about becoming a mere television performer. Benjamin J. Stein was making a somewhat similar point in *The Wall Street Journal* when he compared Clinton's deeply cynical approach to the legal issues surrounding Whitewater to that of Richard Nixon (for whom Mr. Stein once worked as a speechwriter) to Watergate. Compared to Clinton's, "Nixon's cover-up was a ramshackle, paste-up, poorly conceived job at best," and the reason was that Nixon

> was filled with shame and turmoil. He really did feel tortured and divided about Watergate and his own role in the drama. He could not organize a successful defense partly because of his loyalty to the Constitution, partly because he did not know how far the scandal would reach, but (I am convinced) mostly because he was crippled by his own sense of embarrassment. It was this vestigial, old-fashioned, quaint sense of shame that paralyzed him, as Arthur Miller wrote at the time, and kept him from acting most effectively to save himself.

> Bill Clinton is a modern man. Narcissistic, shameless, devoted only to self-aggrandizement. Shame never enters into the calculus because, after all, what good would it do him? Shame would diminish the memory and speed of the Clinton Central Processing Unit. Shame is a virus that eventually could disable the entire machine. Without it, you can organize a defense that laughs at court orders, sneers at congressional requests, and treats the Constitution as window dressing. Without it, you get a Watergate/Whitewater defense that actually defends.

This is well said, but it makes a common mistake, which is to suppose that a conscience and a sense of shame are the same thing. They are not. A conscience is an individual matter; it may be developed in childhood from a combination of moral and religious teaching or it may have deeper, Freudian explanations, but it is peculiar to the individual, it is learned behavior and it may, in some individuals, not exist at all. A sense of shame, however, is at once more instinctual and more social. We are all born with a sense of shame about our bodies, but the more elaborate, adult sense of shame is the product of social factors. If in the public eye of one's society, or the part of it which most matters to all who are bound by honor, it is a shameful thing to break one's word, then everyone will feel the sense of shame on being revealed as someone who has broken his word. If it is not, then no one will. Or no one who is capable of forgetting the time, not so long ago, when it still *was* shameful.

In other words, shame is a cultural phenomenon and one which has changed out of all recognition in a not-very-long lifetime. Those changes explain not only Nixon, but also Bush and Dole, who were all of an age to remember what it was to have a sense of honor and shame. It was this sense—the honor of going, the shame of not going—which took them all (along with the rest of their generation) off to war. Now in time of war it is not possible to forget the connections between politics and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

real life, and it is not easy to be hip and cynical about what politicians say. People do not risk their lives for someone just because he enjoys campaigning. Yet Nixon and Bush and Dole all found themselves forced rather awkwardly to adapt to a media culture, grown up during our long peacetime, in which old-fashioned honor is a joke, old-fashioned shame is a marketable commodity (Dole actually got rather good at public crying), and the only really shameful thing is to look unattractive.

Small wonder, then, that the latter two both found themselves at such a disadvantage *vis á vis* someone like Bill Clinton, the man on whose lips cant and nonsense never sits awkwardly and who can rap out the three-hundredth repetition of his absurd "bridge to the twenty-first century" with as much confidence as the first. In time, and maybe quite soon, the media people will grow tired of him; they may even find it amusing to ask him all those tough questions that they neglected to ask him during the campaign, with a view to toppling him from his seat of power. But they will not find him so easy a mark as Nixon was. Having allowed so much "goddamn nonsense" to pass without comment, they may find that they have lost the credibility, and perhaps even the power, to condemn it in the future.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication this month of *The Hunter Gracchus and Other Papers on Literature and Art*, by Guy Davenport (Counterpoint, $18.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Verse chronicle

Old guys

by William Logan

Mitteleuropa Surrealism isn't what it was when the Balkans, the Orthodox Church, and the Ottoman Empire brooded in the background. Surrealist poems, those uncompromising, gritty, erotic protests against logic or meaning, were once the dreams Kafka suffered, the dreams of an insurance clerk. In America, Surrealists like Charles Simic write like this:

> They had already attached the evening's
> tears to the windowpanes.
> The general was busy with the ant farm
> in his head.
> The holy saints in their tombs were burning,
> all except one who was a prisoner of a
> dark-haired movie star.

Fanciful, mild-mannered (you're in danger of stubbing your toe on the meaning), the poems in *Walking the Black Cat*[1] often sound like translations, or merely like translators. (Many American Surrealists seem to know the originals only in translation—why *shouldn't* they sound like translators?) Surrealism isn't the same in a land of Burger Heaven, Frito Banditos, and drive-in movies.

Simic's poems favor whimsical, offbeat subjects: bad TV reception, kitchen implements that talk back, a charm-school proprietor, a garden of barbed wire. Or they're about wives, playing cards, cats (a lot of cats), ghosts, any old thing, as long as it can be treated in easy-chair fashion. At worst the poems break down into a shudder of random statement and low-voltage detail: "The blue trees argue with the red wind.// The white mare has a peacock for a servant." Who would have thought even Surrealism would come down to its clichés?

Simic wasn't always so civilized. His childhood was spent in Yugoslavia and his first language was Serbo-Croatian, so he knew about war (as a boy he stole helmets and ammunition from dead German soldiers). There was a quiet menace to his early books, *Dismantling the Silence* (1971) and *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), the precision of nightmare made flesh. When he was young, he knew how to be savage (the arthritis set in long before he won his Pulitzer). Now he can barely be bothered to put two spirited words together. His poems exist in moral negation—there's no living emotion anymore, just literary hamming (for him, the emotion was once in the seeing). His wiseguy manner is a defense against feeling, which is fine if your readers are refrigerators.

> Rocky was a regular guy, a loyal friend.
> The trouble was he was only a cat.
> Let's practice, he'd say, and he'd pounce
> On his shadow on the wall.

When a poem begins like this, you hope it was written at gunpoint.

1 *Walking the Black Cat*, by Charles Simic; Harcourt Brace, 83 pages, $24.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sometimes Simic starts smirking, as if he thought he were Ashbery or Tate. Only a few lines remind you of the poet he once was (when time and eternity "Cast no image/ As they admire themselves in the mirror," you think—Oh! Vampires!). A poem titled "Slaughterhouse Flies" ("Evenings, they ran their bloody feet/ Over the pages of my schoolbooks") is suggestive and creepy, and "Cameo Appearance" treats politics as Beckett might. But too often now Simic sounds like a poet working on a merit badge. Poetry isn't suited to aesthetic denial, unless you're an ascetic; and it isn't suited to emotional denial, either, unless you're one of the living dead.

A. R. Ammons has always been a crotchety, damaged, unlikely poet, a modern Diogenes living in a bathtub and grousing about nature and metaphysics. If he starts a poem, "Rock frozen and fractured/ spills, a shambles," you know he'll soon come to phrases like "tiers of time" and "metaphysical debris." He can't walk through a forest without being bushwhacked by mortality and ontology (you end up thinking he couldn't *possibly* walk through that many forests). Most people go to the forests to get away from the metaphysics.

Words like *thicket* and *parameter* are always suggestive together, as long as you don't try to explain *why* they're suggestive. The naked concrete noun and the naked abstract term are a marriage made in Plato's cave (and attended by Shrödinger's cat). Ammons records the transient, devious nature of mind at meditation; and his best poems tend to be large, unfolding roadmaps of passing fancy, AAA Triptiks through all the small towns of the brain.

> In a time of big cars, a small car raises eyebrows:
> this law, lowly derived, is as high as any
> other sky:
> contempt, amusement, curiosity: but if then
> the cars
>
> switched, big to small, the law would remain
> the same:
> another law, older than Kepler: (trilliums
> by the
> trillion whitened the slopes broken down
> by brooks,
>
> I noticed the other day as I rode in my car,
> small, as
> it happened): I don't know: I just have a few
> words
> to say: it's not my world, no: even though
> it is
>
> the only world and, so, mine or not, mine. . . .

This is an ungainly mixture of genius and junk—Ammons would be preening at the Apocalypse, but always noticing, noticing, noticing. He's a poet whose faults are hard to like and whose virtues hard to respect. His last book, titled *Garbage* (with a leaden dose of irony), was a splendidly out-at-elbows treatise on all our junk dreams. *Brink Road*[2] is itself a bottom drawer of a book, some of the poems uncollected for more than two decades, most of them expressions of a mode long perfected: the poems jigger this way and that, argue out of both sides of their mouths—they're pell-mell, hobble-knobble, zigzag affairs, fretful and confounding by turns.

There's little to protect such poetry from prose, and often all that salvages it from prose are the white spaces—only the spaces of poetry make this poetry. Without them, we would be left with:

> Poems are forms of protective coloration by which a person insecure in his true colors takes trial stances of coloration to imitate true colors or to baffle detection, either by simple baffling or by adopting disguise of common conventions or to direct attention from his differences by putting on the unconventional act. . . .

Ammons's flaws are so disfiguring it's impossible not to notice them: a lot of his

2 *Brink Road*, by A. R. Ammons; W. W. Norton, 230 pages, $23.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poems are tedious (you trudge through the physics to get to the nature, but it wasn't worth the trudge); they're ponderous, muddled performances, terrible and trivial at once, like an elephant balanced on a pinhead. Just when you fall in love with a stripped-bare description of the natural world, or an improbable insight into the human, he'll start a poem, "Anxiety clears meat chunks out of the stew, carrots, takes/ the skimmer to floats of greasy globules," or succumb to blather like "The flow-finding of the making impulse/ rounds the curve, of what-is/ and shakes out scaffolding/ suitable to the outline of the perception. . . ." He'll end a confused rumination on the limits of nature with a line so awful it ought to receive some sort of prize: "remarkable sucked fizzy drinks burning the mucous."

Ammons doesn't always take himself seriously—a big galoot of a poet, he's proud of being nearly unreadable (his poems "bowing to no one, nonpatronizing and ungrateful"), but knows he likes to be read. You can tell it gets under his skin when a review says he falls "far short of Stevens"—but it's true, he does fall far short of Stevens. Often he falls far short of Ammons (when he refers to Stevens, he soon drags in the Flintstones, too). He's not the philosopher-in-a-banker's-suit Stevens or the woodsy moral-hunter Frost, though he's a bit of a Yankee (by adoption) and was once a bit of a business executive. And yet. And yet, he's a much deeper poet than he sometimes appears to be (a poet who can write, "The quickest/ way/ to change// the/ world is/ to// like it/ the/ way it// is," has no business being deep); and in glimpses, at odd angles, the mortal lessons take the prosy metaphysics into pressures you never thought they could survive. He thinks about the world in a way poets rarely do, but only his "tinctured core of brutality" redeems means so limited and yet so grandiose.

Robert Hass is a man of letters in the California mode, devotee of Eastern philosophy but also Eastern Europe, translator of classical haiku as well as Czeslaw Milosz. His rangy, laid-back essays, collected in *Twentieth Century Pleasures* (1984), are the record of a reader, a reader in love (such a meticulous nurse of his own pulse he's almost a hypochondriac). There's a goofy, Summer of Love innocence to his poems (few serious poets would attempt an aria about snot), but also a sharp-eyed suspicion of authority, especially the romantic authority of poetry itself.

Sun Under Wood[3] is full of romantic gestures. Hass can scarcely pass a tree without falling into a swoon—he would love to have written "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison."

> This morning in the early sun,
> steam rising from the pond the color of smoky topaz,
> a pair of delicate, copper-red, needle-fine insects
> are mating in the unopened crown of a Shasta daisy. . . .

Such lines are ravishing, blooming into vision like Impressionist paintings; but every swoon comes with its little load of guilt and shame. Hass has grown increasingly skeptical of poetry's illusion, and many of these poems are about writing poems. He'll start a poem, "Maybe you need to write a poem about grace," or remark on a description of creek stones, "It is good sometimes that poetry should disenchant us,/ I wrote, and something about 'the heart's huge vacancy,'/ which seemed contemptible." A poem titled "Layover" is followed by the prose poem "Notes on 'Layover,'" details and incidents he might have included, but did not.

The fashionable term for such radical nihilism is deconstruction (not so fashionable, if even poets are familiar with it), but it's often hall-of-mirrors narcissism. Most readers assume a poem was written, that a writer did not compose in the heat of battle or passion the words that lie so easily on the page. Few readers want to be told, line by line, that the ink dried up, the writer

3 *Sun Under Wood*, by Robert Hass; Ecco Press, 77 pages, $22.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was hungry, the visitor from Porlock was knocking on the front door again, because few readers want to be treated as slightly retarded.

Hass's dry self-examinations have a faintly puritanical edge, as if the reader's sublimation in pleasure were illicit. The midget commissar at the center of his verse can never admit that even the breaking of illusion is an illusion—the writer was writing then, too. Many of the Poet Laureate's new poems, when they aren't about his own poems, are ragbag suites or odes, flitting from subject to subject (a poet tired of "subjects" is often reduced to writing about writing), their concerns unified only by the writer's illusion of impulse—they are the progress of their own pathology. A poem that moves from his broken marriage through a brother's crack addiction, a trip to Korea, Derrida, and torture yearns to make things whole. The memorable lines have nothing to do with arthouse artifice.

> In the town center
> of Kwangju, there was a late October market fair.
> Some guy was barbecuing halfs of baby chicks on a long, sooty contraption
> of a grill, slathering them with soy sauce. Baby chicks.

This has the somewhat studied common touch ("Some guy . . ."), but it's direct and discomforting. When he writes of his marriage or his alcoholic mother, the intensity of emotion overcomes his primness about illusion; yet such passages cannot atone for the aimless notebook narratives, the occasional giddy awfulness (little songs about his mother's nipples: "What could be more fair/ than les nipples de ma mère?"), or a few lines of callow self-absorption ("There ought to be some single word/ For the misery of divorce./ It dines upon you casually/ duh-dduh-duh-duh-dduh-fierce/ remorse/pierce").

Hass is at times a rare and original poet. He's willing to try things no one else would, and willing to fail at them, too (and contemplate the failure, and bat it around with his paw). His sweet, aw-shucks reasonableness can get on your nerves—he doesn't have much time for catharsis or pity. If he's a blander version of Rexroth, he reminds you of a time when we *had* autodidacts and iconoclasts like Rexroth. Hass's better poems sustain themselves within their ambiguities, acknowledging the pain they work hard to avert.

> She says to him, musing, "If you ever leave me,
> and marry a younger woman and have another baby,
> I'll put a knife in your heart." They are in bed,
> so she climbs onto his chest, and looks directly down into his eyes. "You understand? Your heart."

In a poet uncomfortable with the sly suggestiveness of language, "musing" is all too suggestive of a muse whose looks could kill.

Sigmund Freud of voyeurs, analyst and analysand of complex states of watching, C. K. Williams has accepted the labor of observation with an almost religious devotion. We look to religion for words like *passion*, which has infected our image of love with a theology of suffering. In *The Vigil*,[4] as in his recent books, Williams has turned the long verse line of Whitman, that brawny lover of men, of laborers and loungers, into the medium of modern urban anxiety, of naked souls in the naked city. It is not without religious instinct that such densely neurotic notation of the inner life has been called *confession*.

Williams is a smalltown, Sinclair Lewis busybody about the lives of others—a store clerk murdered in a hold-up, his dying caught on camera; an old acquaintance beaten to death in an alley; a retarded woman given a peanut to eat before a little audience of ladies; a neighbor who keeps a wretched menagerie in her apartment:

4 *The Vigil*, by C. K. Williams; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 78 pages, $18.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Her five horrid, deformed little dogs, who
incessantly yap on the roof under
my window;
her cats, god knows how many, who must
piss on her rugs—her landing's a
sickening reek. . . .

If you're not squeamish, Williams makes you *want* to be squeamish. Soon that poor old woman is not just mad, she's Medea. Williams's gift, if it is a gift, is to turn the most loathsome observations against himself: the ravaged presence of this woman is shadowed by memories of a lover he'd once been cruel to—as if, in some Borgesian reality, they might be the same woman. They're not, and he knows they're not, but at the center of his disgust is a kind of erotic longing. His own sins are the first to be written.

Unfortunately, Williams also has other designs upon the reader. He loves the extra gush of significance that places his poems high in the annals of bathos: "the true history I inhabit, its sea of suffering, its wave to which I am froth, scum" or "Quickly, never mind death, never mind mute, oblivious, onrushing time: wake, hold me!" or "the leaves quake, and Oh, I throw myself this way, the trees say, then that way, I tremble,/ I moan, and still you don't understand the absence I'll be in the void of unredeemable time."

Such lines confirm your worst fears—that the poet is a little too aroused by his own nakedness. Many of these poems are anatomy lessons (you feel Williams would like to buy a textbook and take out his own appendix). The poet watches himself, watches those around him (in a way that must be excruciating to those around him), watches the poems that will never relieve him of responsibility for what he observes. Here and there, in "Hawk" and "Insight" and "The Lover," Williams achieves a passionate despair that rivals Edwin Arlington Robinson's lesson in neurotic psychology, "Eros Turannos."

. . . at first she thinks it's just coincidence;
after all, she knows she's
sometimes wrong,
everyone is sometimes wrong, but with him
now all there seem to be are
sides, she's always wrong;
even when she doesn't know she's arguing,
when she doesn't care, he finds
her wrong,
in herself it seems she's wrong, she feels she
should apologize, to someone,
anyone, to him;
him, him, him; what is it that he wants from
her: remorse, contrition,
should she just *die*?

The rising panic is precisely pitched on the rhyming of wrongs. At such moments the poet's loss of shame becomes a perfected form of guilt. Far too many poems, however, are like watching a dog eat its own vomit.

Williams must hope, vainly, that watching can change things, even when he knows that nothing can change (why else would he be so attracted to transformation, to poets like Ovid and Rilke?). If things could change, we would not have to die. Williams's poetry seeks absolution, and confession must always come before absolution. You leave his poems, as you leave most rituals, feeling more soiled than ever.

The death of Joseph Brodsky last January invited the usual pieties for an unusual public career. Brodsky had been adopted by this country with old-fashioned warmth, the way it adopted Nureyev and Baryshnikov and would have adopted Solzhenitysn, had he not retreated into isolation in Vermont. Brodsky, forcibly exiled from the Soviet Union in 1972 (therefore passing most of his adult life in America), was a rakish, engaging, impish character—the Byronic gestures were not always unconscious—and it was hard to see beyond that character to the poetry. The poems were obscured not just by the difficulties of translation.

Brodsky was fortunate in his translators, at least until he took the major role himself

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(if a lawyer who hires himself has a fool for a client, a poet who translates himself has a fool for a translator). Earlier translators gave his work English sense and style, at the cost of making him sound like Wilbur if the translator were Wilbur, Hecht if the translator were Hecht (many American poets would like to be translated into the English of Wilbur or Hecht). It was not clear, however, how much of this Russo-Wilbur or Russo-Hecht was Brodsky.

Most of the poems in *So Forth*[5] were written in English or translated into English by the author, and reading their wayward, tone-deaf lines makes you admire Nabokov and Conrad. Languages may be acquired late, but foreign words are first learned in equal weight or measure—it takes years to absorb the nuance necessary for literary composition. Nabokov and Conrad are test cases of English acquisition (as Beckett might be the parallel case for French); but Conrad didn't write poetry, while Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and his translation of *Eugene Onegin* merely prove how difficult English poetry is for a foreign ear (Nabokov was a genius in English prose, a minor workman at English poetry). Brodsky wrote English prose with rapacious appetite and fluency, but his poetry often sounds like verse by Humbert Humbert. You hear, as if through a lath-and-plaster wall, a noble, muffled intelligence. In his essay "To Please a Shadow," Brodsky claimed he wrote in English only to get closer to Auden, and some of his poems sound like Auden read through a pair of tin cans connected by string.

What are we to think when a poet as gifted as Brodsky, a Nobel laureate, writes "one keeps carving notches only/ so long as nobody apes one" or "the tear could be mine, chin-bound" or "The eye tracks the sinking soap, though it's the foam that's famous"? Or "The battle looks from afar like—'aaagh' carved in stone" and "seven/ years later and pints of semen/ under the bridge" and "a cross between muscular torso and horse's ibid" and "O if the transparent things in their blue garret/ could hold their eye-dodging matter in second gear"? The words are generally right, but all their music is wrong. When a foreign poet writes as if his fingers were in casts, you blame the translators—and Brodsky wasn't always his own translator. He worked with another translator to produce this:

> Twilight in the new life. Cicadas that don't
> relent.
> A classicist perspective that lacks a tank or,
> barring that, dank fog patches to obfuscate
> its end;
> a bare parquet floor that never sustained
> a tango.
> In the new life, no one begs the moment,
> "Stay!"
> Brought to a standstill, it quickly succumbs
> to dotage.
> And your features, on top of that, are glazed
> enough anyway
> for scratching their matte side with "Hi" and
> attaching the postage.

This sounds like Edith Sitwell on a good day or Ashbery on a bad one. Writing in English, Brodsky succumbed to:

> "Right," says the Emperor. "Our enemy
> is powerful, mean, and brash.
> But we'll administer him such an enema
> his toilet won't need a flush.

Rhyme was a method of organization disastrous to Brodsky's style, yet he used it like an addict. English is resistant enough to a foreign tongue, likely to pronounce all sorts of unlikely words as if they were rhymes; but Brodsky could torture his syntax for a rhyme perfectly awful, and even rhymes Cole Porter would have loved (*Noah/spermatozoa*) don't have lines to make them lovely.

When we read poems that go wrong in so many ways (almost always the ways of the ear), we're reminded how much we know about our language without knowing it. A native speaker would never write, I hope, "However you hide the ace,/ the table gets

5 *So Forth*, by Joseph Brodsky; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 132 pages, $18.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hit with jacks of some odd suit and tailor" or "the world changes so fast, as if/ indeed at a certain point it began to mainline/ some muck obtained from a swarthy alien" (probably not a man from Mars). Brodsky wasn't always this bad. "Nativity" opens,

> No matter what went on around them; no matter
> what message the snowstorm was straining to utter;
> or how crowded they thought that wooden affair;
> or that there was nothing for them anywhere. . . .

"Utter" and "affair" are off-key, but the simplicity of this is otherwise its salvation. Or consider this Audenesque quatrain:

> Birds acquaint themselves with leaves.
> Hired hands roll up their sleeves.
> In a brick malodorous dorm
> boys awake awash in sperm.

Brodsky's career in English was a career of might-have-beens. He plainly wanted to stake his claim in two languages (his essays may be his lasting achievement in English), but his pride could not accept his limitations, while mere ambition could not overcome the absence of what a native speaker absorbs through his pores. We read foreign poetry not for its music—for what is lost in translation—but for its angle of vision and strangeness of attack, for an architecture foreign to us, not imprisoned in the conventions of English verse (which for most poets mean the practices of their contemporaries). These autumnal poems of death and decay, turning often to elegy, show beneath the dead matter of translation that freshening of the foreign. But the poems themselves are now an elegy for great ambition.

Anthony Hecht's new book, *Flight Among the Tombs*,[6] opens with a collaboration with Leonard Baskin, whose nearly two-dozen engravings of Death are densely inked nightmares of skeletal figure, a Who's Who of cadaverous posture and macabre costume. Hecht's elegant and dryly witty commentaries look beyond the grave by looking at the grave. He must have jumped at the chance to caption such illustrations, the poems have such a show-offy, self-satisfied air, an air a little at odds with their subject. Hecht has always been a brooding, melancholy character (sometimes the melancholy has been purchased wholesale), and the pitiless glances of his work have been a stern reminder of a world of violence and holocaust beneath the sweet inconsequentiality of our poetry.

Death abides in life, poets are forever reminding us—we live already swaddled in our burial clothes. Here is "Death the Oxford Don":

> Sole heir to a distinguished laureate,
> I serve as guardian to his grand estate,
> And grudgingly admit the unwashed herds
> To the ten-point mausoleum of his words.
> Acquiring over years the appetite
> And feeding habits of a parasite,
> I live off the cold corpus of fine print,
> Habited with black robes and heart of flint,
> The word made flesh for me and me alone.
> I gnaw and gnaw the satisfactory bone.

No poet since Pope has written of scholars with more disdain, and Hecht revels in the ironies of his own long life as a scholar (what would humor be without a little self-loathing?). Hecht takes the measure of engravers, too; but Death appears in so many guises (poet, painter, carnival barker, judge, Punchinello), the sequence has the festive spirit of a Dance of Death.

There are gorgeously rendered passages throughout this sequence, and two or three poems of fatal, moving eloquence. The longest, "Death the Whore," is an unsparing portrait (like Hecht's haunting poem "The Deodand") of the depravity of the sexual gaze—only Hecht could suffuse *Victoria's*

6 *Flight Among the Tombs*, by Anthony Hecht; Knopf, 76 pages, $23.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Secret catalogues with the smoke of a crematorium. Hecht's strength as a poet, apart from his easy knowing meter (full of little trysts and elopements), has been this willingness to take the modern on its own terms, to embrace the detritus of popular culture as if it too had secrets to reveal.

The sequence otherwise is disappointingly workmanlike—the verse is professional, artfully crafted, all the sawdust swept out of view, but it is the disinterested labor of a man paid for a job of work. At times Hecht hasn't taken advantage of the subject: "Death the Film Director" might have reminded us how devoted photography has been to death (in the cinema, to the scapegoat death of actors), how all photographs are in the end portraits of the dead. Instead we get shallow ridicule of Hollywood. The worst poems end with cheesy puns or clichés ("Death Riding into Town" compares Death to Clint Eastwood and ends, "Go ahead, make my day!").

The dozen or so poems in the remainder of the book are reminders of Hecht's graces: reworkings of Meleager and Horace; a villanelle; elegies for James Merrill and Joseph Brodsky (so fulsome it might have been written by one of those state poets Brodsky despised); a clutch of poems on classical themes, smelling at times of mildew ("Yet she is wed, in heaven or hell's despite,/ To an ignoble, titled troglodyte"). One of these, however, is a devastating picture of a Latin class, with all the pathos of the boys' halting mistranslations and the teacher's undeciphered homoerotic longing.

> "Thompson," he'd murmur, "please instruct
> our class."
> And Thompson would venture, timidly, much
> rattled,
> "Caesar did withhold his men from battle,
> And he did have enough in presentness
>
> To prohibit the enemy from further
> wastings,
> From foraging and rapines." And through
> a long
> Winter campaign of floundering, grief,
> and wrong,
> That little army force-marched without resting.

"That little army" is the class, and you're reminded that many armies have been made of boys not much older. The stumbling, desperate, hopeless march toward learning is nearly heartbreaking (if this were Greek class, you'd wait—in vain!—for them to get to the mountaintop with Xenophon and shout *Thalassa! Thalassa!*), and you can tell Hecht delights in all he implies about classes, and teachers, and learning. "Proust on Skates" doesn't come to much, but it opens with one of those passages that begs to be quoted:

> The alpine forests, like huddled throngs
> of mourners,
> Black, hooded, silent, resign themselves
> to wait
> As long as may be required;
> A low pneumonia mist covers the glaciers,
> Spruces are bathed in a cold sweat, the late
> Sun has long since expired. . . .

Flight Among the Tombs contains little of Hecht's best work, his acidic lines on human nature (nature nature, too), his astringent, moral colloquy with history. But in a long and magnificent career he's written dozens of poems I've nearly read the ink off of, have taught and quoted with pleasure, among them "Third Avenue in Sunlight," "Behold the Lilies of the Field," "The Dover Bitch," "'More Light! More Light!'" "'It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It,'" "The Cost," "An Autumnal," "The Ghost in the Martini," "The Deodand," "An Overview," "Persistences," "The Book of Yolek." Very few poets have ever handled English words with such devotion, and Hecht has written with extraordinary passion (always dry, dry passion—like a martini mixed with the memory of vermouth) into late age. We have had no better poet of war to honor these decades of peace, or what we have chosen to call peace.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

Brownout in the City of Light

by Brooke Allen

Postwar Paris is a mythical place, dear to the hearts of a whole generation of Americans. Art Buchwald's recent memoir, *I'll Always Have Paris*, blends the familiar ingredients once again: Sartre and de Beauvoir at the Deux Magots, *The Paris Review*, Alice B. Toklas, Harry's New York Bar (located at 5 rue Daunou, pronounced by American visitors "Sank Roo Doe Noo"), A. J. Liebling and Janet Flanner, Irwin Shaw, James Jones, Romain Gary. It was Hemingway's moveable feast, extended well into the 1950s. Thanks to the G.I. Bill, brilliant young Americans could shake the dust of Brooklyn or the Midwest off their feet while taking in the pleasures of Paris. These pleasures were their due as members of the conquering army—as winners.

There was another postwar Paris, of course, one that has not been romanticized and that most people have been eager to forget: that of the losers. The losers were bereft of their homes, their families, their money, their nationalities, often their self-respect. They were German, East European, Russian, Jewish, even French. To them World War II had been anything but the "good war" celebrated by American veterans: it comprised a historical moment of great collective shame, and left behind armies of dispossessed, displaced people.

Few writers have written of this other Paris, this other Europe, with the clear and unromantic vision of Mavis Gallant, the seventy-four-year-old author whose short stories, many of them first printed in *The New Yorker*, have recently been brought together for the first time.[1] In Gallant's postwar Europe,

> no person was ever to blame for his own poverty or solitude. You would never have dreamed of hinting it could be his own fault. You never knew what that person's past might be, or what unspoken grudge he might be hiding. There was also a joint past that lay all around us in heaps or charred stone. The streets still smelled of terror and ashes, particularly after rain. Every stone still held down a ghost, or a frozen life, or a dreadful secret. A social amnesty had been declared.

The speaker is German, but she might almost as easily be French or Italian. The continent had become a moral minefield and everyone, whether innocent or guilty, was implicated.

Some of the survivors amount to little more than human wreckage. For instance young Thomas, in "The Latehomecomer," has spent five years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Rennes, then five more being shuttled around France, a victim of bureaucratic muddle, before his eventual repatriation to Germany. He is well aware that his very person represents a truth of which Europe, busy reconstructing herself, has no

---

1 *The Collected Stories of Mavis Gallant*; Random House, 887 pages, $45.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wish to be reminded. "My appearance, my survival, my bleeding gums and loose teeth, my chronic dysentery and anemia, . . . all said 'war' when everyone wanted peace, 'captivity' when the word was 'freedom,' and 'dry bread' when everyone was thinking 'jam and butter.'" Reconstruction is not simply a matter of economics but a subtle psychological process, a recreation of national identity and a new, carefully adjusted version of the past. For Germans, the war is now "the conflict" and the Nazi era "the Adolf-time." For the French, the process of self-justification becomes almost an academic exercise: in "Speck's Idea," for instance, Sandor Speck, an East European art dealer long resident in Paris, reflects, decades after war's end, that "there was right and right. . . . Nowadays the Paris intelligentsia drew new lines across the past, separating coarse collaborators from fine-drawn intellectual Fascists"—though Speck could "not quite remember why *pure* Fascism had been better for civilization than the other kind."

"The Other Paris," written in the 1950s, is thematically characteristic of Gallant. Carol, a naïve girl from a "nice" Midwestern family, comes to Paris in the late Forties to work as a secretary in an American government agency. While there she becomes engaged to Howard Mitchell, a thoroughly appropriate young man. She is not in love with him, but feels that in Paris, the most famously romantic spot in all the world, it is only a matter of time before love comes. Yet the city's romance eludes her.

> It was a busy life, yet Carol could not help feeling that something had been missed. . . . When she rode the Metro, people pushed and were just as rude as in New York. Restaurant food was dull, and the cafes were full of Coca-Cola signs. . . . Traveling through Paris to and from work, she saw only shabby girls bundled into raincoats, hurrying along in the rain, or men who needed a haircut. In the famous parks, under the drizzly trees, children whined peevishly and were slapped.

Carol's only French friend is Howard's secretary, Odile, an unappealing, impoverished woman ten years her senior. Carol finds herself becoming inexplicably agitated by Odile's down-and-out young lover Felix, an Austrian orphaned by the war, who has come to Paris without papers. Carol deflects her unacknowledged attraction to Felix with gusts of annoyance against him. Why does he hang about doing nothing? Why doesn't he get a job? "For Carol, the idea that one might not be permitted to work was preposterous. She harbored a rigid belief that anyone could work who sincerely wanted to." Through Odile's and Felix's sad lives, Carol is finally accorded a vision of the "other," real Paris, but it is a vision of such loneliness, almost despair, that she immediately rejects it. By the time she returns to the States as Howard's wife she will have invented, and come to believe, her own conventionally romantic, Paris-in-spring-time version of their courtship.

If Mavis Gallant writes of displaced persons, perhaps it is because she herself is one. She was born Mavis de Trafford Young in Montreal in 1922. Her parents were English and Protestant, but flying in the face of Montreal custom they did not isolate themselves among their own kind: plenty of their friends were French. "This overlapping . . . of French and English," Gallant writes in her autobiographical study "Linnet Muir," included in this collection, "of Catholic and Protestant—my parents' way of being, and so to me life itself—was as unlikely, as unnatural to the Montreal climate as a school of tropical fish. . . . My parents and their friends were, in their way, explorers."

The Youngs were a flighty, sexy couple far more interested in their social lives than in the company of a small child. At the incredible age of four, Mavis was packed off as a boarder to a French convent school, the first of seventeen schools she was to attend. Her parents were self-involved and pleased with themselves, and Gallant writes that, to her own young self, their lives had "seemed so enchanted, so fortunate and free that I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could not imagine lesser persons so much as eating the same kind of toast for breakfast." Parents who mythologize and glamorize their lives were to become a recurring theme in Gallant's fiction: in "The Remission" a selfish, beautiful mother keeps an unloving grip on her daughter in order to retain her as a sort of moral hostage, proof to the world that she is beloved by her children; in "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" a good-for-nothing Canadian couple on a rapid downwardly mobile trajectory congratulate themselves on their glamour and *joie de vivre* while implicitly criticizing their cautious, colorless children.

Gallant's own father died when she was a child; her mother remarried and moved to the United States, and Mavis was left with strangers. With a chillingly precocious sense of survival, she dissociated herself from her unsatisfactory mother and at the age of eighteen, quite alone in the world, she landed a job at a Montreal newspaper as their first and only woman reporter.

Nine years later Gallant decided that if she were ever to realize her ambition of writing fiction, she would have to leave the routine work of journalism and the security of a paycheck. "I believed that if I were to call myself a writer," she says, "I should live on writing. If I could not live on it, even simply, I should destroy every scrap, every trace, every notebook, and live some other way." The intransigence of this position is puzzling; many writers, after all, have produced first-rate work without supporting themselves with it.

Gallant left Canada for Paris. "No city in the world drew me as strongly as Paris. (When I am asked why, I am unable to say.) It was a place where I had no friends, no connections, no possibility of finding employment should it be necessary." She gave herself three years to make a paying venture of fiction. *The New Yorker* rejected the first story she sent, but accepted the next, thus beginning her long, happy association with the magazine.

Gallant's youth in Canada, and the jumble of cultures to which she was exposed there, provide her work with a richness that is especially apparent when she writes of her compatriots. In one of her most memorable stories, "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street," two Canadians, one on the way up and the other on the way down, meet in the middle. Peter Frazier comes from an upper-class Ontario family, but his inheritance—both financial and moral—had already been wasted before he grew up. "Peter's father's crowd spent. . . . Peter and his sister and his cousin lived on the remains. They were left the rinds of income, of notions, and the memories of ideas rather than the ideas intact."

And Peter spends in his turn; he and his wife have squandered every job and every friendship that has come their way. Landing in Geneva, he becomes a clerk at an international agency, where his boss is Agnes Brusen, a lower-middle class young woman from a Scots family in Saskatchewan. Peter recognizes the family type: "the iron-cold ambition, and every member pushing the next one on." "In the real world," he reflects, "he would not have invited her to the house except to mind the children"—a brilliant touch, for what is the real world? Agnes and Peter, for all their mutual antipathy, represent something powerful to one another, and in fact Peter, looking back on his life years later, recognizes Agnes as the most vivid and mysterious part of it.

Gallant is an uncompromising writer, and of all the cruel portraits in her work, perhaps the most unflattering of all is the one she paints of the British living in self-imposed exile on the Mediterranean. Such characters are often Fascist sympathizers: "The Four Seasons," the second story in the collection, gives a brutal picture of a third-rate crowd of English expatriates in Italy before the war, trusting in the Duce to keep them, and their pounds sterling, safe from harm. "In the Tunnel," written in the 1970s, depicts an extroverted Canadian girl who is befriended by an insidious but superficially attractive trio of Brits, charming as long as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the girl amuses them but ice-cold when she ceases to do so.

Despite Gallant's chosen subject, her work is not—at least not usually—depressing, for it has a strong satiric streak, which has grown with the years. The purely satiric fiction is not really the most effective: the Henri Grippes stories, for instance, whose place in Gallant's work and life correspond roughly with that of the Pat Hobby stories in Fitzgerald's, consist of irony to the exclusion of everything else, and so get quickly dull. But the majority of the stories balance irony and emotion and are effective on several levels. Even Gallant's potentially tragic characters often display a certain absurdity. In "Baum, Gabriel, 1935–( )," Gallant gives a sharp, amusing picture of the marginal existence of a group of German refugees in Paris who make their living acting in stereotyped war movies.

> Dieter spread the paper on Gabriel's table, sat down, and told him about the film. It would begin with a group of Resistance fighters who were being deported jumping out of a train. Their group would include a coal-miner, an anti-Semitic aristocrat, a Communist militant, a peasant with a droll Provençal accent, a long-faced Protestant intellectual, and a priest in doubt about his vocation. Three Jews will be discovered to have jumped or fallen with them: one aged rabbi, one black-market operator, and one anything.
>
> The one anything will be me, Gabriel decided, helping himself to chestnuts. He saw, without Dieter's needing to describe them, the glaring lights, the dogs straining at their leads, the guards running and blowing whistles, the stalled train, a rainstorm, perhaps.
>
> The aristo will be against taking the three extra men along, Dieter said, but the priest will intercede for them. The miner, or perhaps the black market man, will stay behind to act as decoy for the dogs while the others all get in a rowboat and make for the maquis. The peasant will turn out to be a British intelligence agent named Scott. The Protestant will fall out of the rowboat; the priest will drown trying to save him; the Communist—
>
> "We know all that," Gabriel interrupted. "Who's there at the end?"

Gallant, in short, never perceives her world one-dimensionally. She points to the essential humor in the dreariest and most aimless lives; she is adept at seeing the cold kernel of egotism within the warm swell of patriotism or parental love; she will find a few lost, pathetic strands of goodwill in the most debased people. Her stories, taken together, summarize the history of mid-twentieth-century Europe: not the great events themselves, but the small lives they dislocate.

Precincts of elsewhere

Thomas Mallon
Dewey Defeats Truman.
Pantheon, 368 pages, $24

reviewed by Peter Schwendener

Many—one is tempted to say most—contemporary novels take a purely private emotional situation as their point of departure. It is part of Thomas Mallon's approach to invert this formula by placing public life at the center of his novels. His latest, *Dewey Defeats Truman*, is set in Thomas E. Dewey's hometown of Owosso, Michigan, and unfolds over the months preceding the 1948 presidential election, which Dewey, the Republican candidate, was widely expected to win. The certainty of Dewey's impending victory over the incumbent, Harry Truman, shapes most of the action in this novel, including the love affair that stands at its center.

Dewey, of course, does not win (DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN was the November 3, 1948, headline of the then-conservative *Chicago Tribune*, a paper with ulterior reasons for jumping the gun). The love affair, which is actually a love triangle, is rather charmingly employed to measure the effect of national politics on private, even intimately sexual, life. The heroine is Connecticut-born

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Anne Macmurray, recently graduated from the University of Michigan, who wants to write "a novel, one that had nothing to do with herself." To support herself she has taken a job at the only bookstore in Owosso, where when we first encounter her she is reading the most popular novel of the day, *The Naked and the Dead*. What is a beautiful, literate girl from the East Coast doing in Owosso, Michigan? The explanation recalls Philip Larkin's poem "The Importance of Elsewhere":

> All through the war her imagination had thrived by thinking of real life as what took place elsewhere and got lived by other people. "Elsewhere" had survived the war as an idea, a lure, and the notion that Owosso might be one of its quiet, unexpected precincts had brought her here a year ago.

She is duly courted by Peter Cox, "the town's number-one up-and-coming Republican" who is both a lawyer and candidate for the state legislature, and by the much sexier Jack Riley, a war hero and UAW official in nearby Flint who is in town the summer before the election to take care of a sick father. The theme of the two politically opposed suitors is mirrored on the national stage by America's choice between the scrappy Truman and the painfully decorous Dewey of whom Alice Roosevelt Longworth is credited with saying, "He looks like the little man on the wedding cake" (some people still think it was this remark that did him in). Unlike the candidates for Anne's affections, Dewey and Truman are distant, mysterious creatures, especially Dewey, who hasn't been in Owosso for thirty years. The symmetrical pairing of the love triangle and the national election gives the novel something of a fairy-tale quality. We are not in Updike territory, where a hallucinatory vividness seizes every bicycle, cocktail napkin, or disordered bedsheet, but in a more generalized setting where the emphasis falls on moral, emotional, and political choice.

There is a pleasurable sensation throughout the novel of an author who respects the line between private and public life but realizes that the line has a few holes. There is also an agreeable amount of sheer craziness that hovers at times on the verge of the improbable. Anne falls for the Democrat Jack Riley, mainly because he's great in bed, and as their affair proceeds (the other suitor, Peter Cox, glumly accepts it) a wild assortment of subplots is set in motion. Owosso's business community, positive like the rest of the country that Dewey will win, begins planning a kind of Dewey Theme Park to be erected on the banks of the Shiawassee River. This greatly upsets the aged Horace Sinclair, a veteran of the Spanish-American War who for forty years has been accustomed to gaze at the riverbank with "a riot of emotion," as he angrily tells one of the project's boosters. He also has something buried there that he would rather not see dug up. There is a grief-crazed widow and a tortured, homosexual high-school teacher named Frank Sherwood whose solace consists in stealing to the roof of his boarding house and gazing through a telescope at happier planets. Frank is occasionally joined in this activity by the widow's only remaining son (she lost the other in the war), a dreamy, incipiently alcoholic youth who steals a plane at the local air show and disappears, like Icarus, "into a sun so bright it seemed more silver than gold."

All of this suggests a novelistic recasting of *Winesburg, Ohio* or *Spoon River Anthology*. The difference is that Mallon, though he flirts with the gothic, is interested in creating more than a gallery of small-town grotesques. When the retired colonel, Horace Sinclair, is portrayed "sipping his glass of iced tea and not looking up from his copy of *Ivanhoe*," we sense that Mallon, like Sir Walter Scott, is trying (as in Mallon's earlier novels *Henry and Clara*, *Aurora 7*, and my favorite, *Arts and Sciences*) to make the past stand out as something more than an object of nostalgia. It is certainly more than this for Horace, who is permitted the following, perhaps too pointed, reverie:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> *The past*. Of all the advice that Horace Sinclair received from his fellow Owossoans . . . the piece he most disliked was the injunction against "living so much in the past." It always assumed that the past, while perhaps not a bad place, was too easy a spot for anyone to live in; that abiding there was an "escape" that didn't challenge the mind. . . . Horace knew that living in the past demanded much more effort than living in the here and now.

Nobly put, though the novel is more comfortable when embodying this view in character and action, as it mostly does.

The heroine's affair with the priapic union organizer Jack Riley, like America's affair with Thomas E. Dewey, doesn't pan out, though when she eventually lapses into the Republican arms of Peter Cox she tells him, "Wherever we go, I'm still going to be a Democrat," to which he replies, "At least I know the worst" (I'm not giving anything away; the surprises are all in the way this reversal is effected). A minor pleasure of this novel is its unobtrusive literary references. When the more bookish inhabitants of Owosso talk about Ross Lockridge's *Raintree Country*, *The Naked and the Dead*, and even classics such as *Ivanhoe* and *Paradise Lost*, it sounds unforced ("'fug' you," Anne tells one of her suitors, having just put down her copy of *The Naked and the Dead*).

One of the more egregious slogans of the Sixties was "the personal is the political." It is egregious not because it is altogether false but because it is a kind of antidote to subtlety. The political, along with the literary, is mostly a matter of personal choice; love is something else, at least according to Peter Cox, who as the Truman-Dewey campaign winds down is given some of the best dialogue: "You're in love with me, Anne. It's not a political or a literary decision you get to make. It's the simple truth. I'm not an idea, and it's not my fault that I'm richer and better-looking than Jack." Normally when a contemporary novelist tries something overtly historical the result is the forced transplanting into another era of alien ideas. Thomas Mallon manages to seal his Owossoans off from the present without rendering them humanly unrecognizable.

Ant's-eye views

Edward O. Wilson In Search of Nature. Island Press/Shearwater Books, 192 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Paul R. Gross

A rare thing these days: a passionate public environmentalist, genuinely convinced that humanity is on a suicidal course, who does not denounce in fiery characters capitalist greed, modernity, the hubris of technoscience, an excess of testosterone, speciesism, or any of a dozen other archenemies of the theory class. Still rarer is that passionate environmentalist who really knows—as regards the science of the predicted crash-course—what he is talking about. E. O. Wilson is such a rare bird, or, to use the high-school nickname to which he confesses in an essay on ophidian terrors, a rare snake. Best, though, would be "rarest ant," for he is the world's great authority on those astonishing beings and, biophile though he may be, loves them more than snakes or sharks.

Snakes, sharks, ants, and other fauna are well-covered in this small volume, a collection of essays by the world-acclaimed biologist and author. Published originally between 1975 and 1993 in books (including Wilson's own), scholarly journals, slick magazines, and Sunday supplements, and updated for this presentation, the pieces have disparate topics: the habits of colonial insects; universal dreams, fears, and symbologies of serpents; the present and future status of biological systematics; the real (not the journalistic) relationship between genes and behavior; the necessity of a true *socio*-biology; the possibility of environmental ethics.

But they have been arranged by a cunning hand: the disparity is only apparent. Taken together—and it is easy to take them

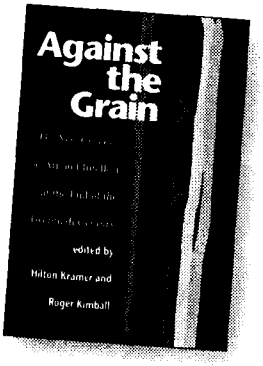
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No one who reads this volume can be in any doubt what the cultural war in the U.S. is all about, or who ought to win it."
—Paul Johnson, *The Wall Street Journal*

Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball



An abundant selection of incisive writings from the magazine that has emerged as the foremost voice of critical dissent in the culture wars now raging throughout American society. *The New Criterion,* writes Paul Johnson, "upholds the highest civilized standards in our culture and combats the new barbarism." Written with wit, clarity, and fierce independence, *Against the Grain* is a major contribution to sanity and common sense on the most contentious cultural issues of the day.

Just published in hardcover and paperback.

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher
Chicago 60622
At your bookseller, or order toll free 1-800-634-0226 with a major credit card.

all, so pleasant is this reading—these essays are a two-part message from the author. The first is, Here are the main questions and researches to which I have devoted my professional life, and this is how they are all connected. The second is, That connection is a particular view of humankind, of its urgent predicament and its prospects, to which a comprehensive understanding of all life, including its history on this planet, is indispensable.

The history is important. Either life has emerged on Earth over a span of time via processes that have come to be understood in the life sciences of the past 140 years, or it has not. If biological diversity and its myriad ways of life (our own included) are products of evolution, and the mechanisms thereof are at least broadly those that biologists see in the structure and actions of genes, the spontaneous variability of genes, their control of development, and the developmental roots of behavior; *and if* those behaviors ultimately affect, on the scale of ecosystems, not only the biosphere but the physical Earth as well, then—and only then—are a social biology and a rational, active environmentalism essential to our survival. If the history of life—as science sees it—is wrong, if the scenario has been designed, planned, or managed by agencies external to the Earth's biosphere, then a biological view of the human condition, especially of our behaviors and our future, is bric-a-brac.

The latter is, needless to say, not Wilson's position. The core argument of these essays, sometimes explicit and sometimes hidden in bewitching anecdote, is that because we are the byproducts of our becoming, because our ancestors were carnivorous apes and theirs were the numberless vertebrates and invertebrates in their pasts, we are in trouble: our reproductive success and the proliferating cultures that have made it possible are our doom—unless we begin seriously to make changes. I can't imagine that anti-evolutionists and mystics will be many among readers of this book, but they ought to be. Even if they reject the central argu-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ment, they would find in this volume an accessible and logical statement of its broadest implications. Thereby they would understand, as few of them do now, what are the assets (to use a recent military term) of the opposition.

Lest the impression arise that these are pessimistic essays, I hasten to note that they tend toward the opposite. Wilson is, for example, more optimistic than the evidence justifies about the prospects of taxonomy and natural history receiving top billing (again) among biological disciplines. He forsees an early fusion of the biochemical and physiological sciences with the behavioral ones, and the merging, or at least cooperation, of the latter with the social sciences. All those seem to many of us, however, to be drawing fast apart. His treatment of his opposition on environmental questions is civil and rational. Rather than labeling them polluters and oppressors, as is stylish now even in academic journals, he names them, in a closing essay, "exemptionalists"—believers in humanity's foreordained release, for one or another reason, from the harvest of harm it has done and is doing to the thin skin of life at the planet's surface. He summarizes their arguments with as much care as he does his own. This is, in short, vintage Wilson: facts, statistics, stories in profusion, but all easily traceable to solidly documented observations; and the whole welded together in prose that is at once plain and lyrical, simple and subtle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notebook

The end of the affair

by Erich Eichman

Earlier this year, famously, the physicist and political leftist Alan Sokal submitted a fully footnoted, jargon-filled essay of pure nonsense to the editors of the academic journal *Social Text*, arguing that physical reality was merely a social construct. He didn't believe a word of it, but he was trying to make a point. The editors published the essay, Mr. Sokal announced his hoax, and all hell broke loose.

For many, the hoax did in fact reveal—as Mr. Sokal intended—the vacuousness of academic theory and the absurd incoherence of the language in which it is perpetrated. For others, however, the hoax was an unforgivable act of disloyalty that undermined a political project of great importance, especially in the university: the effort to "interrogate" knowledge and "unmask" the hidden power relations that determine the bourgeois definition of the "truth." This is what academic theory—especially the kind practiced by *Social Text*—claims to be doing much of the time.

Members of both camps showed up at New York University's Meyer Hall on Wednesday evening, October 30, to witness a panel discussion—hosted by NYU's journalism department—entitled "After the Media Event: Politics, Culture & the *Social Text* Affair." Among the participants were Alan Sokal himself and Andrew Ross, one of the editors of *Social Text* and by far the most glamorous "cultural studies" professor in the entire universe. Not surprisingly, the auditorium was filled to overflowing. In academic terms, this was a Big Deal.

The evening's moderator was Jay Rosen, a teacher of journalism at NYU, who made it clear from the outset that "After the Media Event" was to be a purely intramural discussion, a "family affair" concerned with the "civic health of the Left." (Given the university venue, this exclusion of rightward views was easily enforced.) Unafraid of cliché, Mr. Rosen argued that it was time to get past the media hullabaloo and "put a different frame around the event," to progress "toward a deeper understanding," to go "into depth about larger issues," to "break new ground"—even to "move the discussion forward." (It somehow does not come as a surprise that Mr. Rosen is an editor at the treacly monthly magazine *Tikkun*.) Toward this end, he announced that, despite the contentiousness of the subject, the panel discussion was "an inquiry, not an inquisition." No one, in short, was to be "on trial."

Implicitly, though, both Mr. Ross and Mr. Sokal were on trial, accused by different leftist family factions of betraying either the Enlightenment or the Revolution or both. Mr. Ross was allowed to defend himself first. This he did in a brief talk delivered in a faintly arch style that seemed to amuse his fans in the audience, to judge by the chortling that greeted even his woollier pronouncements.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It should be said that Mr. Ross's sentences had a certain decentered quality that often made it difficult for the uninitiated to grasp exactly what he was trying to say. The gist was that *Social Text* had nothing to apologize for. *Lingua Franca*, the magazine that had revealed Mr. Sokal's hoax, had perpetrated a "yellow media exposé." The hoax was part of a backlash—on the Left—against "feminism, multiculturalism, and the queer renascence." Mr. Sokal's "needlessly polarizing" stunt in no way delegitimized *Social Text* or its content. Because the Enlightenment had been used to support racism and sexism, it was right to subject it to a critique, which is what *Social Text* had been doing in its notorious Sokal issue. Above all, Mr. Ross made it clear, scientific knowledge was still to be considered "like all other forms of knowledge": that is to say, it was not safe from a postmodern interrogation that would question its "assumptions about universality." He did concede that "language"—that is, the obscurantist language of academic theory—"is a serious problem." "I am no dissenter," he said, "from this complaint." But, he added, "I am not going to sign up for an evangelical clean-up squad." In a final flourish of leftist family values, he argued that "guilt-tripping" and "false polarities" would not help in the fight against economic injustice.

All this was greeted with sustained applause, a prelude to Alan Sokal's remarks. Now, it needs to be said that there is a certain aspect of theater to even academic events: Mr. Ross, with his bracelets, earring, loose white shirt and perfectly trimmed, longish black hair, looked as if he had stepped out of a casually hip advertisement in *Details* magazine. Mr. Sokal, on the other hand, lacked only a pocket protector and a slide rule to fit central casting's image of a clean-cut science geek. In this respect, he was at a disadvantage—given the atmosphere of edgy postmodern subversion emanating from various sectors of the crowded auditorium—but only in this respect.

Mr. Sokal's main argument—true to its theme—was logically structured and conceptually coherent. Truth, he said, was a matter of reason, objectivity, and evidence. The purpose of his *Social Text* hoax was to reveal the sloppy thinking that had infected certain elements of the Left under the influence of postmodern theory. Only by reasoned argument, he felt, could the Left defeat the demagoguery and superstition of its enemies. The "hypersubjectivity" of postmodern theory—which emphasizes group identities—merely "plays into the hands of anti-rationalists" by trumpeting "local knowledges" at the expense of universal truths. Mr. Sokal proudly declared himself a "leftist and a feminist" and thus especially troubled by trends that might "divert us from a leftist social critique."

At this point, Mr. Sokal did something very clever: he referred to a real-world controversy that might *demonstrate* his point. This startling digression had a momentarily tonic effect, although it caused no end of trouble later on. He cited a recent *New York Times* story about the war of words between archeologists and Native American creationists over the right to study various prehistoric skeletons found on Native American grounds out west. Archeologists almost universally believe that the peoples of North America came here from Asia, across the Bering Strait, as skeletal remains confirm. Tribal creationists, however, believe that their people literally sprang from the ground, and they wish to bury the skeletons before the scientists can use them to advance a "falsehood."

For Mr. Sokal, this controversy showed the foolishness of "local knowledge." Clearly reason, objectivity, and evidence were on the side of the archeologists, and yet one man cited in the article—a nonlocal, empathetic British archeologist, in fact—had maintained that the Zuni world view (the Zunis reside in Arizona, where some of the disputed skeletons can be found) was "just as valid" as that of the archeologists. But how could it be? As Mr. Sokal was at pains to point out, these warring explanations of human origins were mutually exclusive:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they could both be wrong, but they could not both be right. Broadly speaking, he said, the principles of the scientific method (emphasizing evidence logically studied) were the best way of adjudicating the matter. The postmodern Left—obsessed with group identities—forgets this at its peril, Mr. Sokal warned. He was especially horrified when a hostile article in *Tikkun* on the hoax (its author was not Mr. Rosen) included the statement that "truth can be another source of oppression." Mr. Sokal clearly thought this was the wrong road for the Left to travel. His remarks were greeted with respectful applause.

Two other panelists had their say before the free-form questioning began. Ellen Willis, a professor of journalism at NYU and a longtime *Village Voice* contributor, delivered an even-handed, anguished disquisition on the "tensions and weaknesses of the Left" that had been revealed by the Sokal hoax. She was not really willing to condemn the nonsense in *Social Text* and journals like it—and in fact congratulated postmodern theory for opposing Marxist conceptions of class that overlooked culture—but she was not at all happy with the insularity and hermeticism that now were so much in evidence, and she lamented the "overvaluation of particular identities." The Left, she said with a certain weariness, "is in dismal shape right now" and "paralyzed in the face of all-out class war by global capital."

Ms. Willis was followed by Stanley Aronowitz, a professor at City University of New York and one of the founding editors of *Social Text*, although apparently he did not participate in the decision to publish the Sokal piece. Mr. Aronowitz is not a thin or a shy man, and much of what he said, although incomprehensible, was refreshingly entertaining simply because it was delivered with such clownish brio. He reminded those who did not know that *Social Text* had been founded seventeen years before to contribute to the "renovation" of the "Marxist project." And "that is still what it is about." He alluded to the Frankfurt School and condemned the media's characterizations of *Social Text* (including, later, "the affair Kimball," that is, the article in this magazine by its managing editor for June 1996). He went on to declare the real issue to be "scientificity" and rambled a bit through postmodern theory before announcing: "We are not relativists."

The truth of this last statement was not entirely evident in the discussion that followed. As Mr. Aronowitz's talk dissolved into commentary by other panelists—Mr. Ross reasserted at one point that "science is not a neutral discourse" and Mr. Aronowitz seconded the idea—the moderator, Mr. Rosen, tried to bring things back down to earth. This was a mistake.

For Mr. Rosen, the *Social Text* hoax was principally about one thing: "Are there any intellectual standards in this corner of the Left?" The bluntness of the question and the allusion to standards set off a bout of hissing from the audience. After a certain amount of to and fro, in which Mr. Ross joked about how standards are supposedly always "falling," never "rising" (this was considered hilarious by his claque), Mr. Rosen asked his question about standards again. Mr. Ross responded, with mild heat, that "standards are about ethics," which require that you don't "practice deception." Mr. Sokal recognized this as a jab at his hoax and parried it by pointing out that the editors of *Social Text* had been free to judge the content of his article quite apart from whether he believed it himself, which was irrelevant. So neatly did he make this point that he was rewarded with a brief round of applause. The adulation was short-lived.

In the course of the audience questioning—some of it sensible, most of it not—someone asked Mr. Sokal "how you know truth when you see it." He responded by returning to the archeologists' troubles with the Zuni creationists. He repeated the simple law of contradiction (mutually exclusive ideas can't both be right) and appealed again to evidence and logic. Then a student in the back, with real heat, thun-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dered: "On whose authority should we be forced to answer the question?"

It is difficult to convey how swiftly this query derailed the evening. The questioner angrily went on to complain that the choice required by Mr. Sokal's logic "presented a double bind," for only "particularisms offer resistance to the epistemic violence you're proposing!" At this point there was much appreciative murmuring from the crowd and a few huzzahs of assent.

For Mr. Sokal and Mr. Rosen, though, all this was completely baffling. Mr. Sokal recited the law of contradiction again and restated the need to rule from evidence, which seemed so obvious to him, but he was rewarded for his pains by guffaws from the knowing theory fans in the audience, who clearly considered him blinkered in exactly the way a logocentric hegemonist might be. He finally gave up. "I don't understand your question." Mr. Rosen didn't either. First he couldn't remember the name of the Native American tribe being discussed ("Who are these people again?") and then he naïvely asserted: "Isn't the question, Where do these people come from?" The exasperation of the audience was palpable: It certainly was not!

It was left to Stanley Aronowitz to explain, rather condescendingly, that the inquisitor had raised a "metatheoretical question." (Sighs of relief all round.) In short, the man was asking whether "the framing *itself* is subject to interrogation." This was considered helpful, and the questioning went on, but the raw collision of theory and reason had finally struck a jarring note. Family etiquette had been breached, and things could not be the same. Todd Gitlin, another NYU professor of journalism, stood up to say a few words on behalf of intellectual standards, which would allow the Left to prove, for instance, that "Charles Murray is a fraud." But the Zunis reappeared when Andrew Ross, inspired by another question and response, turned to Mr. Sokal to say "you *cannot* dismiss Zuni thinking as prejudice." (It's odd how categorical a category-busting theorist can be.) Another person innocently asked Mr. Ross how one could defend the Zuni world view and not at the same time disarm oneself for combating Jerry Falwell and other Christian fundamentalists who have their own creationist ideas.

This was an obvious and sensible question. A lesser man, when faced with the task of answering it, might have stumbled over his own inconsistencies and beat a retreat. But Andrew Ross is not a famous cultural theorist for nothing. He simply "reframed" the question. He pointed out that it sadly ignored "the inequality of power relations between the two groups" (Zuni, fundamentalist Christian). He then asked Mr. Sokal why he was putting Native Americans "on trial" with his archeology example, since they were the most "screwed over" and "marginalized" group in American history. "That is a very political choice," he said. Fortunately, this sally inspired a certain amount of groaning and hissing from the audience, although probably some percentage of it was aimed at the purblind Mr. Sokal for having misguidedly questioned the Zuni way of knowledge in the first place.

The long evening ended with an editor of *October* magazine standing to declare to the editors of *Social Text*, empathetically, "that she knew what it was to be attacked by Roger Kimball." She then proceeded to speak in a roundabout way of a "crisis in language," which was "symptomatic of a larger crisis." Stanley Aronowitz seemed to agree: "We lack the capacity to understand one another." To Mr. Sokal he magnanimously said: "You've gone far to begin the discussion." And then, in the only direct admission of error in the entire evening, he declared: "Look, *Social Text* fucked up. . . . But the project of *Social Text* is not a fucked-up project!"

I suspect that Mr. Sokal would say that this is another case where the laws of logic might lead one to a different conclusion. If the first statement is true (and it is), then the second statement cannot also be true (and it isn't).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*One of the more amazing runs in American letters . . .**

Partisan Review

Winter 1997

Featuring:

Reflections by **Czeslaw Milosz** • **H.J. Kaplan** on The Death of Mitterrand • Experts in Political Violence Under Communism by **Paul Hollander** • We Pragmatists by **Susan Haack** • An Exchange with **Philipe Sollers & Marc Fumaroli** • New Fiction by **John Thompson** • **Louis Sass** on Wittgenstein and Freud • **S. Ben-Tov** on The Israel Science Corps • Poetry by **T.S. Eliot, Les Murray, L. S. Asekoff, Lynne McMahon, W.R. Elton, Karen Volkman, Brian Swann,** and more . . .

* *New York Magazine*

A special offer to New Criterion readers
Subscribe now and save 20%!

___ 1 year (4 issues) at $17.50
___ 2 years at $36.00
___ 3 years at $45.00

Name: _____
Address: _____
_____
_____

___ charge card VISA: _____ Exp. _____
___ check enclosed MasterCard: _____ Exp. _____

Return to: **Partisan Review • 236 Bay State Road • Boston, MA 02215**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Recent articles:

PC Has a Price
William E. Simon

Racial and Sexual Politics in Testing
David W. Murray

Reassessing the Adversary Culture
Paul Hollander

Differing Views on *The End of Racism*
Dinesh D'Souza

Abuses of Scholarship in Constitutional Cases
John Finnis

Comments on the Culture Wars and Political Correctness
Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Sanford Pinsker
EDITOR
Franklin & Marshall College

The official journal of the National Association of Scholars

"Whoever wants to know what scholarship and teaching are suffering on the American Campus should read Academic Questions."
Jacques Barzun

"Because it promotes full academic freedom and the diversity of ideas in a time when these privileges cannot be taken for granted, Academic Questions *is a beacon to the academic world."*
Edward O. Wilson
Baird Professor of Science, Harvard University

Academic Questions

Published Quarterly

Subscription rates:
Individuals: $50/yr; $96/2yrs; $126/3yrs
Institutions: $116/yr; $204/2yrs; $264/3yrs
Foreign surface mail add $32/yr
Foreign airmail add $48/yr
(Rates subject to change annually)

transaction

TRANSACTION PUBLISHERS
DEPARTMENT 2097
RUTGERS--THE STATE UNIVERSITY
NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY 08903
WWW.TRANSACTIONPUB.COM

Call 908/445-2280 or Fax 908/445-3138

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New from Guy Davenport

An extraordinary collage of ideas, commentary, and criticism

"Davenport is among the very few truly original, truly autonomous voices now audible in American letters."
George Steiner, *The New Yorker*

"Whose work will still be read in the next hundred years? Guy Davenport, for one."
John Gardner

"One of our most gifted and versatile men of letters."
Hilton Kramer, *New York Times*

COUNTERPOINT
WASHINGTON, D.C.

THE BOSTON BOOK REVIEW

http://www.BostonBookReview.com/BBR

The Best of Both Worlds

The Apollonian

The Bostonian

The Dionysian

The thinking person's book review.

The smartest writing on the most important books, sold in over **900** bookstores and newsstands in the United States and Canada. Subscribe to the ***Boston Book Review***. Discover the well-written.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

1 yr. (10 issues) $24.00

Canada and International add $16.00

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Credit Card Payments: *(or call 617 497-0344)*

No. _____ Exp. date: ___

Signature: _____

☐ VISA ☐ MC ☐ DISC ☐ AMEX

Or send check to:

THE BOSTON BOOK REVIEW
30 Brattle Street, 4th floor
Cambridge, MA 02138

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Special Offer to the

Chesterton Review

"Anyone concerned with traditional values will find much of interest in this excellent journal."

Ted Byfield, Founding Editor,
The Alberta Report

"There is something in every issue of the *Review* to surprise and delight me."

Garry Wills, author and critic

"SERIOUS AND LIVELY, SCHOLARLY AND POPULAR, ECUMENICAL AND PARTISAN ... A REBUKE TO THOSE WHO SUPPOSE SERIOUS WRITING CANNOT BE FUN TO READ OR THAT AN ORTHODOX VIEWPOINT MUST BE A NARROW ONE."

ROBERT P. GEORGE,
DEPT. OF POLITICS,
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

Subscribe now and save up to *30% off* the ordinary subscription rate.

Plus This Special Offer For New Subscribers:

For each $35.00 subscription to our quarterly, the new subscriber will also receive a ***free copy*** of one or more of the following special issues:

*❑ Twentieth Anniversary Special Issue	❑ Maurice Baring	❑ Charles Dickens
*❑ Ethics and Economics in Post-Communist Europe	❑ Father Brown and Detective Fiction	❑ Japanese Christian Writers
	❑ Christopher Dawson	❑ Karl Kraus and Aurel Kolnai
*❑ George Bernanos	❑ George Grant	❑ Cardinal Manning
*❑ C. S. Lewis	❑ Hilaire Belloc	❑ Chesterton and the Modernist Crisis

New subscribers receive a **free copy** of any one of our jumbo special issues (indicated by an asterisk) normally sold for $15.00 each **OR two free copies** of any of the regular special issues normally sold for $9.00. Please check which of the special issues you have chosen as your bonus.

Please enter my membership to the *Chesterton Review* for one/two years at $35.00 per year. (Outside Canada payable in U. S. dollars.)
❑ One year ($35.00) ❑ Two Years ($70.00)

Name .....

Address .....

City .....

Province/State ..... Postal/Zip Code .....

Charge to VISA # ..... Expiry Date .....

Make cheque payable to:
CHESTERTON REVIEW, 1437 College Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7N OW6 Canada **or for faster service for your VISA order call:** (U.S.A.) PHONE **or** FAX **1-800-260-9363** Elsewhere, PHONE: 1-306-966-8917 or FAX: 1-306-966-8904

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

edited by Richard John Neuhaus

FIRST THINGS

"...a pungent brew of moral earnestness, brilliance, wit, palaver, news, frivolity, poetry, and political horseradish..."

— Thomas C. Oden, Drew University

Discover a journal that gives you a fresh and refreshing look at today's most important religious and moral questions.

From abortion to post-modernism FIRST THINGS engages you in a lively and profound conversation about the ordering of public life.

12 Issues of First Things RISK FREE

❑ **YES!** I'd like to try this sprightly, outspoken source of ideas and insight on religion and society. Please enter my 12-issue subscription (one year, plus two bonus issues) for only $19.95 — more than $25 off the newsstand price.

NO RISK, FULLY GUARANTEED If I am not absolutely delighted with my First Things subscription, I'll receive a full, prompt refund on all unmailed

NAME _____ ☐ **Payment enclosed**

ADDRESS _____ ☐ **Bill me**

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____ Charge my: ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Card # _____

Expiration Date _____

6N1296

FIRST THINGS * P.O. BOX 3000 * Denville, NJ 07834

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MATTHIAS DÜWEL

RECENT WORK

LARGE-SCALE PAINTINGS

3 to 20 December 1996 and 6 to 11 January 1997

Monday–Saturday 11 to 5

ACHIM MOELLER FINE ART

167 EAST 73RD STREET NEW YORK NY 10021 FAX 212 988 8480 TELEPHONE 212 988 8483

HTTP://WWW.MOELLERART.COM

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 400
New York NY 10019

Periodicals Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED